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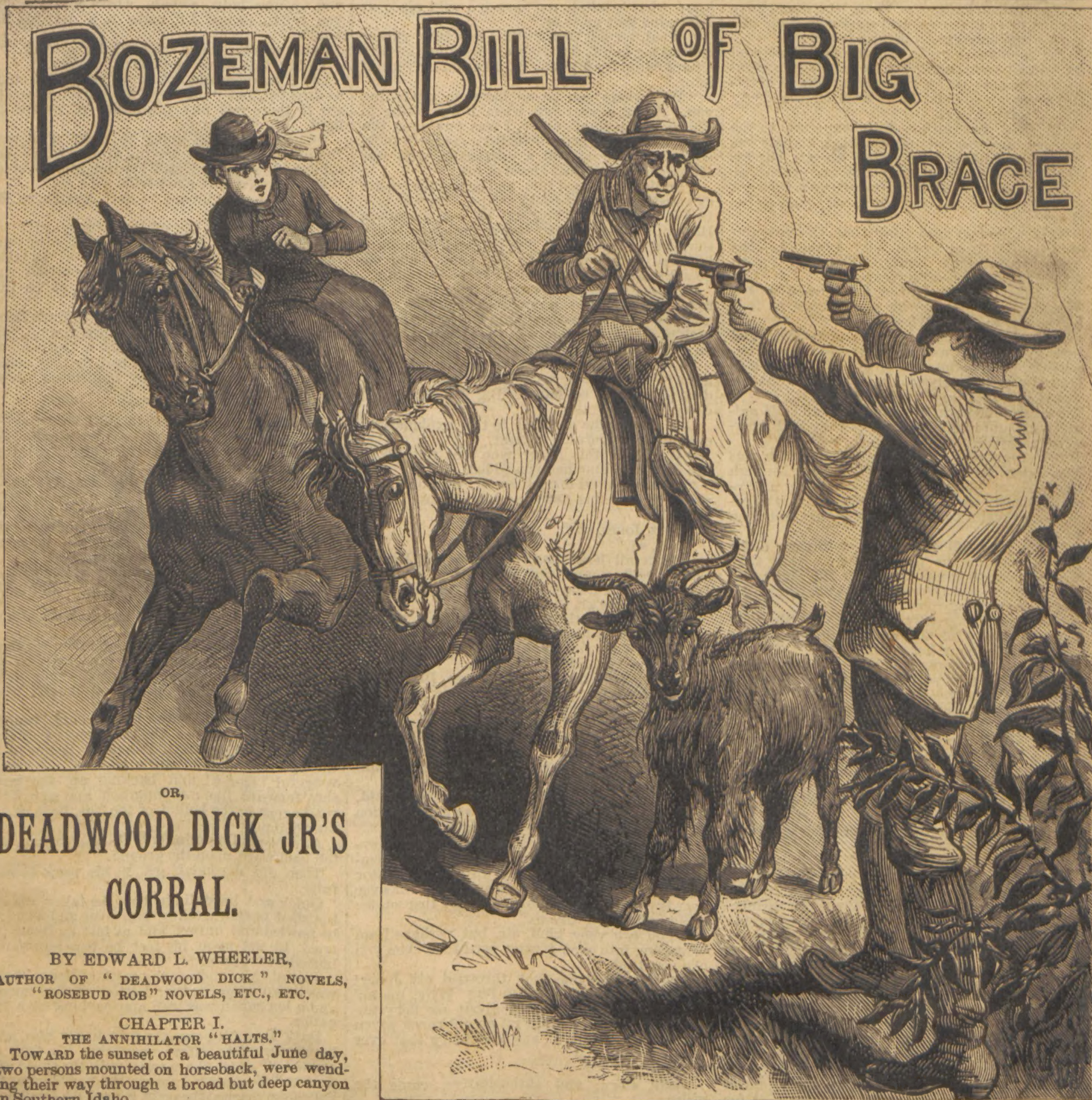
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OR, DEADWOOD DICK JR'S CORRAL.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ANNIHILATOR "HALTS."

TOWARD the sunset of a beautiful June day, two persons mounted on horseback, were wending their way through a broad but deep canyon in Southern Idaho.

Each side of the canyon was bordered by stupendous mountains, but the bottom was grassy

OLD AVALANCHE IMMEDIATELY DREW REIN. "GREAT HAM-BONE! WHO AIRE YOU?"
THE ANNIHILATOR DEMANDED, IN SURPRISE.

and flower-decked; a noisy brooklet wormed its way through to the southward; birds sung in the bushes their parting lays of the day; far above the sun yet gilded the peaks in gold; far ahead, as the canyon ran in straight course, lay a vista of supreme loveliness.

The two travelers were a beautiful young woman, and a weather-beaten, frontier veteran.

The contrast between the two was so striking, that we must pause to describe them.

The young lady, though a trifle below the average height of women, was formed in nature's happiest mold, and evidently about eighteen years of age.

In face she was remarkably pretty—one of those faces whose pleasant expression and sparkling brown eyes betokened a sunny nature.

Her hair was brown, like her eyes, and most becomingly arranged beneath the jaunty hat; while her riding-habit was a model in fitness and good taste.

Her horse was a spirited animal, while its accouterments were handsome and yet serviceable.

Hard at contrast with this fair traveler was the veteran who evidently acted as her escort and guide, for it was easy to be seen that she was a stranger in the Far West, who would have seemed more in her natural sphere in some elegantly appointed metropolitan parlor.

Her escort was a man of medium stature, and quite stoop-shouldered, but his movements seemed to indicate that he was still capable of activity, although he must have been on the shady side of sixty in age.

His face was darkened by exposure to the weather, and scarred and wrinkled; his hair was liberally sprinkled with silver threads, but his eyes were of youthful brightness and sharpness.

One peculiarity about his appearance was that both of his ears had been shorn off, close to his head!

In fact, he was none other than the redoubtable veteran frontiersman, Old Avalanche—the hero of more than a hundred desperate scrimmages and hair-breadth escapes.

He was roughly attired, and armed with a Winchester repeating-rifle that looked as if it had seen a deal of service.

The animal he bestrode was undersized, and terribly scrawny, and had a wicked eye and unprepossessing countenance, while by its side trotted about as ugly looking a billy goat as one would encounter in a year's search.

An invincible trio was this scout and his animal pets, and many the conflict they had figured in, together.

Old Avalanche's young lady companion was Miss Janet Earl, whom he was escorting through the wilds of Idaho, to the new mining excitement, known as Big Brace, where she was going to lay claim to some property that had been left her.

It was yet a full day's journey to their destination, and as the prospects were that they would have to camp down for the night, Old Avalanche's keen eyes were on the lookout for a desirable camping-spot.

Miss Earl was greatly enthused over the wild natural beauty of the scenery, and gave frequent expression of her admiration.

"Yas, et aire purty enough," Old Avalanche admitted, "but ef ye'd been thru'es many scrimmages an' skewrups thru ther West, as I hev, yer eyes fer scenery would all get knocked bias. Why, great ham-bone thet tantalized ther larnyx of old Joner! Et ain't been more'n a couple or three year, thet any one would dare venture inter this canyon, without an escort o' twenty ter thirty!"

"Was it on account of the Indians?" Janet innocently inquired.

"Waal, now, by ther jumpin' Jehosephat, I should say et war!"

"Were there many of them?"

"Many? Great snortin' snakes! Did ye ever see a passel o' flies congregate around a plate o' merlasses? Waal, they warn't the durned least sarcumstance—great antediluvian ham-bone, no. An' when ye come down ter fightin', we're jest ther rip-roarin' cyclones at that, you bet—me, Jeremiah, that's me goat, and Florence Night-in-a-gale, that's me hoss. I tell ye, when we uster get into a scrimmage, we made the fur fly, an' no mistake! I did ther shutin', Florence did ther kickin', an' Jeremiah ther buttin'—an' great pestiferous ham-bone, what a trio we used ter make! When ye come down to buttin', Jeremiah he aire the daisy. Ef I war ter storm a citerdel, an' use him fer a batterin'-ram, I'd win every time. An' as fer Florence's kickin' perpensities, ther' ain't nothin' ter beat her. Why, once she kicked so hard at a red nigger, thet she cast a shoe, and et went

cl'ar over ther sun, an' landed on ther planet of Mars, an' I got a notis next day, that ef I didn't come up and claim thet shoe, they'd charge me storage on et.

"Why, great ham-bone thet batted ther larnyx of old Joner!" added the Annihilator, in conclusion, "them were great times, they were. We uster think nothin', on a rainy day, of sailin' forth an' killin' a hundred or two of Injun!"

Janet smiled pleasantly at the veteran's broad assertions.

They had now been traveling together for nearly a week, and she had learned to understand the Injun Annihilator's eccentricities quite well.

Avalanche never tired of narrating his exploits, and the bigger the yarn the more satisfaction he seemed to take in telling it.

"Those must have been perilous times, indeed," Janet observed. "Do you think we will reach our destination, to-night, Mr. Avalanche?"

"Humph! I reckon, miss, as how we won't sight ther camp afore ter-morrer afternoon. Guess you've got some feller thar, thet ye'r' anxious ter see, eh?"

"No, indeed! I do not know a soul in Big Brace, which, I suppose, makes you curious to know what is taking me to such a wild place as I imagine that must be."

"Waal, ter tell ther truth, I hev been rather cur'ous ter know, fer from all accounts, et aire a hard camp fer a young gal like you ter ventur' inter."

"Well, there can be no harm in my telling you. About a year ago, when I was living in Chicago, as a child's nurse, I was out upon the street one day, when I detected a couple of pick-pockets trying to rob a gentleman who was sauntering along, just ahead of me.

"I quickly warned him, and he had the rogues arrested before they could escape. He was profuse in his thanks to me, said he was Hamilton Hinton, a Western mine-owner, declared that he should not forget me in his will, and, slipping a hundred dollar note into my hand, bade me good-by, and that is the last I ever saw of him.

"I never expected to hear of him again, but to my astonishment, a few weeks ago I received a notice that he was dead, and had left to me the bulk of a large fortune, and that I was to come on immediately, and claim it.

"I have always been quite saving with my money, and having accumulated several hundred dollars, I set out for Big Brace without delay!"

Old Avalanche listened to this explanation, evincing considerable interest.

"Who was this party who sent fer ye?" he asked, when Janet had concluded.

"He announced himself as Mr. Hinton's lawyer, and gave his name as John Jones," Janet replied.

"John Jones, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Beats all how many Smithses an' Joneses thar aire!" commented Avalanche. "Waal, young leddy, I hope ye'll find et all right an' squar' when ye git to Big Brace."

There was something in his tone that caused her to glance at him inquiringly.

"Why, don't you think everything *will* be all right?" she demanded, anxiously.

"Oh! most likely. But, yer see, Big Brace aire a powerful rough camp, made up o' ther skim an' skum o' humanity, an' ther villainous elerment aire top o' ther heap. I've known o' cases, already, where gals from ther East hev bin decoyed West fer no good purpose; but 'tain't likely yourn is a case like that—great antediluvian ham-bone! I hope not."

"Oh! dear, you frighten me!" Janet said, manifesting great anxiety. "I've half a notion to turn back, and not go there, at all."

"Pshaw! don't git skeered, me lady. Ef everything ain't on ther dead level squar', remember thet Old Avalanche, ther Injun Annihilator aire with ye, an' ready ter sarcumvent whoever may try ter put up a job on ye. By ther smoko o' Vesuvius, thet aire so."

"You are very kind, sir, but perhaps I am venturing into even greater peril than even you can ward off."

"Great ham-bone that throttled old Joner! Aire that all ye size me up fer? Why, me an' Jeremiah, ter say nothin' about me fiery untamed steed—we kin jest git up an' knock seven kind o' spots out o' any difickulty that ever war—"

"Halt!"

Clear, stern, and authoritative, came the order.

A masked man had stepped from a clump of bushes, and stood confronting the travelers, whom he covered with two cocked revolvers.

Seeing this, Old Avalanche immediately drew rein.

"Great ham-bone! Who aire you?" the Annihilator demanded, in surprise.

"I am Dark Demming, the road-agent!" was the reply, "an' I'm boss over this particular trail. So make no attempt at resistance, or I'll put a bullet plumb through your cabeza! Throw down your weapons, if you expect to live to get to Big Brace—for I'll salivate ye, at the least refusal!"

"What d'ye want?" demanded Avalanche, grimly.

"I want you to throw down your weapons!" was the stern answer. "Refuse a moment longer, and I'll kill you, and have done with it!"

Long experience in the West had taught the Annihilator that it was always advisable to "cave," when "covered," especially if the "drop" was in the control of a lawless road-agent.

The Dark Demming meant business, there was no room for doubt, so the old guide drew his knife and two revolvers from his belt, and cast them upon the ground.

"Perfectly proper!" Dark Demming announced. "Now, then, old man, dismount, while you, young lady, remain where you are. If you try to escape I'll make it a dear job for you!"

Janet was too much frightened to answer.

To her, this was a most terrible event.

Old Avalanche did not immediately dismount, as directed, but "sized up" his surroundings to see if there was any possibility of escape or fight.

"Come! are you going to make a move?" Demming demanded, moving around to the Annihilator's side, and still keeping him covered. "Mind! you'd better not trifle with me!"

"What do you intend to do?" Avalanche demanded.

"I'll show you. Get off that bone-yard!"

"Looker heer! don't yer cast no insinywations onter my Arabian charger, or, by ther great ham-bone of Hamburg, I'll teetotally Annihilate yer!" Avalanche growled, as he dismounted.

"I'll risk your hurting anybody!" Dark Demming sneered. "You're under my thumb, just at present, and though I am not a bad man to deal with, when obeyed, I'm bad as they make 'em, when any one tries any unlishness. D'ye see this 'ere tree?"

"Well?"

"Put your back against it, till I bind you!"

He accompanied the order by thrusting the muzzle of one of his revolvers directly before the Annihilator's face.

Seeing no way out of the dilemma, Avalanche was forced to obey.

The road-agent then took a rope from his pocket and securely lashed the veteran to the tree in such a manner that there was no possibility of his making his escape, unaided.

"There you are!" Demming said, with a chuckle, as he surveyed his work. "Now, let's see how you're off for rocks."

He deliberately proceeded to search the scout's garments for money.

During the short time it had taken for these events to occur, Jeremiah, the goat, had been an interested spectator, and watched every move and motion as if he understood exactly what was going on.

Several times he shook his head and stamped a foot as if he did not like the aspect of affairs, and finally, when Dark Demming began to go through the Annihilator's pockets, uttering a vengeful baa-a-a! and backing up, the beast shot forward like a thunderbolt and struck the road-agent in the hollow of the legs, back of the knee-joints.

As a result Demming lost his equilibrium, and fell backward upon the ground.

Then did Jeremiah get in his work beautifully.

Quick and hard did he butt the fallen and astonished outlaw, rolling him over and over, as he howled and cursed, and as fast as Demming tried to get upon his feet he was summarily butted over again.

Just at this juncture the rattle of horses' hoofs was heard upon the hard bottom of the canyon and a horseman was seen approaching at a full gallop.

Dark Demming was the first to spy him, and, by a desperate effort regaining his feet, he started off down the canyon with the speed of a deer and disappeared among the bowlders as the horseman reached the point where Old Avalanche was confined.

"Hello!" he cried, "what's the difficulty here?"

Avalanche briefly explained, whereat the horseman gave a prolonged whistle of surprise.

He was a finely formed fellow of medium height—evidently a young man—and attired in a dark suit, red flannel shirt, knee boots and slouch hat, while a belt about his waist contained a pair of self-cocking revolvers.

Little of his face could be seen, except the mouth and chin, as the upper portion was concealed from view by a red cloth mask, through the eye-holes of which gleamed a pair of eyes of magnetic power.

His horse and its trappings were A1, and altogether he was a dashing-looking personage.

"So this is Dark Demming's work, is it?" he said, when Old Avalanche had finished his explanation.

"Yas, thet's ther size of et."

"Was that the fellow I saw running away?"

"You bet! My goat, Jeremiah, had jest bin givin' him fits!" and the old man gave an approving nod toward his pet.

"What was the road-agent's object in stopping you—plunder?"

"Partly, I reckon, tho', sence he tied me here, I 'spect he calculated to run off with Miss Earl, the young lady I'm 'scortin' ter Big Brace."

Ther masked horseman gave Janet an inquiring glance and tipped his hat respectfully.

"Well, it is fortunate you have got off so easily," he said, turning once more to Avalanche, "for Dark Demming is a hard character, and something of a terror around these parts. I suppose you've no objections to being released?"

"Great ham-bone, no. These 'ere cords aire cuttin' inter me, like saws!"

The stranger dismounted, drew a clasp-knife from his pocket, and Old Avalanche was at liberty.

"Cuss my cats ef I ain't much obleeged ter ye, pard," he said, putting forth his hand. "Tho' ye w'ar a mask, I reckon ye ain't no road-agent cuss, an' I'd like ter know yer handle."

"Though I wear this mask, I am not a road-agent, but a detective, was the reply. "My name is Deadwood Dick, Junior."

"What?"

Old Avalanche looked astounded.

"I said, sir, that my name was Deadwood Dick, Junior."

"Great ham-bone that choked old Joner!"

"Why, you seem surprised, my friend?"

"Surprised! Waal, I should snicker at a snake! Say, tell me whar ye tuk thet name from?"

"Certainly. I had a bitter wrong to avenge, not many months ago. I had often heard of the daring exploits of Deadwood Dick, and, late one afternoon, as I was bearing my murdered mother to some quiet place of burial, I came across the graves of Deadwood Dick and Calamity Jane. Then and there I took an oath to avenge my mother's death, and assumed the name of Deadwood Dick, Junior, knowing that he had once struck for vengeance."

"Put 'er there, me boy, put 'er thar!" Old Avalanche cried, enthusiastically. "Great smoke uv old Vesuvius! I'm glad ter meet yer. I know'd Deadwood Dick from ther early days o' his kareer, up in ther Black Hills, till a short time before he passed in his checks. Many's ther desprit adventur' we've hed tergether, an' nary a fallin' out. An', brave as Dicky war, I'll bet my hoss ag'in' a hencoop, ye'r' another cuss o' ther same stamp!"

"Thanks for the compliment, sir, and I hope it may be my good fortune to meet you and your fair companion, again!" Dick said. "For the present, however, you must excuse me, for I must away in search of the outlaw, Dark Demming, on whose head is a reward of five hundred dollars. So I trust you will excuse me."

"And in doing so, we both thank you most sincerely, sir, for coming to our rescue," spoke up Janet, who had in a measure recovered from her fright.

"Thanks from one so fair as you, Miss Earl, is reward enough for more than I have done," Dick gallantly replied.

Then, he sprung into his saddle, and galloped away.

"If all Western men are as polite as he, I know I shall like them," Janet decided.

"Great ham-bone! he's an exception," the Annihilator declared.

A little later, they continued on their way toward Big Brace.

CHAPTER II.

A TERROR'S TERROR.

BIG BRACE!

One of the liveliest, roughest, wildest, most

picturesque mining-camps in Southwestern Idaho.

How it gained its odd name we do not care; it is of scenes and events that occurred within its environs we have to deal.

The "city," as its people termed it, was situated in the bottom of a rugged gulch of considerable width, and numbered probably seventy-five places of abode and business at the time of which we write, including cabins, tents and shanties.

And even these were inadequate to give anything like decent accommodations to the throngs of people who daily rushed into the camp, owing to its reported great mineral wealth—a report that, as in most instances, greatly exaggerated the facts.

Big Brace had a general supply store, an ore mill, several saloons, dance-houses and gambling establishments combined, and a hotel that was little more of a building than the dance-houses and saloons—a two-story wood structure, and quite roomy.

As a rule, the population was made up of the roughest and worst class of people, what respectable element there was being largely in the minority.

On the evening of the day following that which witnessed the events chronicled in the preceding chapter, the "Tallyho," as the hotel had been christened, was the scene of life and revelry.

The hotel was named the Tallyho because it was the halting-place for the stage from Pierce City.

It was a long, two-story affair, of very rough appearance, the lodging-rooms being up-stairs, and the saloon, dining-room and kitchen down-stairs.

For a lodger who was up-stairs to reach the dining-room, it was necessary to pass directly through the combined office, saloon and gaming-room, as the stairway descended directly into this latter apartment; but, as the "hotel" had but few lady guests, this was a matter of no consequence.

The saloon itself was a large room, fitted up with chairs, tables, mirrors, sporting pictures and a long bar, back of which were shelves fitted up with decanters, bottles, glasses and cigar boxes.

The office proper was near the foot of the stairway, and was usually presided over by the boss of the establishment, who boasted of the name Colonel Corker.

The bar was manned by a burly, muscular individual named Sullivan, who report said had once been a pugilist, although probably he was no relative of the Boston bruiser and braggart.

At the close of the day of which we write, the employees of the Hinton Mine, which was the largest in Big Brace, had received their pay, and the majority of them, and they were not a few, straightway proceeded to "make Rome howl," so to speak.

The Tallyho was the most popular place in the camp, for the reason that a fair game was dealt there, and the "p'izen" was above the average.

Hence, by early lamplight the place was well filled, and a motley assemblage it was, too.

Perhaps a hundred denizens were there congregated, and still no two visages alike, while the difference in nationalities was also marked.

As a whole, they were a rough, villainous-looking set.

Of course there were some not quite as rough-looking as others, but these were mostly the professional card-sharps, who presided at the tables.

The aforesaid sharps did not seem likely to reap a big harvest, to-night, however.

The bar was the magnet which caught the eye of the average pilgrim, and the "bug-juice" flowed fast and furious, while boisterous talk, and baccanalian song awoke the echoes of the night.

The conviviality was waxing exceeding warm, when there sauntered into the saloon, a person who had never before been seen in Big Brace.

There was nothing so strange in the fact, as a multitude of strangers were in the camp; but this particular one attracted general attention.

He was of medium stature, but athletic build. His face was a handsome one, the features being round and perfect, and lit up by a pair of magnetic brown eyes. A graceful blonde mustache adorned his lip, while hair of the same sunny hue rippled in gentle waves, down over his shoulders—hair almost as fine and glossy as a woman's.

As regards his attire, his appearance was decidedly dandified.

He was clad in a full suit of spotless white duck, wore a "boiled" shirt with white collar and white silk scarf, patent-leather shoes, and a snowy white broad-brim sombrero. In addition, a diamond pin of unusual size glittered in his scarf, and a massive gold chain ornamented his vest front.

If he was armed at all his weapons were not exposed to view.

Certainly he was the most sportive-looking individual who had ever struck the town of Big Brace, and judging by appearances, he was not much over twenty years of age.

Entering the Tallyho saloon, as stated, he attracted general attention, the drinkers at the bar, even, pausing, glass in hand, to stare at him.

Such a dandy many of them had never before seen.

But notwithstanding all eyes were leveled at him, the stranger did not appear in the least disconcerted. He sauntered about a few minutes, evidently "sizing up" the place, and then stepped to the office and registered.

"BOZEMAN BILL"

was the name he inscribed in the little account book which Colonel Corker blandly assured him was the register.

Inditing his signature, in a bold dashing style of chirography, Mr. Bozeman William seated himself at an unoccupied table, lit a cigar, and puffed leisurely away.

One by one the more curious ones of the crowd sidled over to the office counter, and took a peep at the register, to find who the stranger was. Then they would go back to the bar, and circulate their information, so that, within a quarter-hour after Bozeman Bill's arrival, every one in the room was cognizant of his name.

But he paid little attention to the curiosity of the crowd, and seemed buried in deep thought as he watched the smoke float upward from his cigar.

Like 'most every other mining-camp, Big Brace had its bully and "terror"—its blatant, blustering and would-be conquering ruffian, who set himself up as "the boss" over all the populace, and endeavored to establish his supremacy by brute force.

In the present instance, Jake Jug was this terror—a brawny, lumbering ruffian, with limbs and muscles of prodigious size, coarse of feature, and villainously brutal of aspect.

It was Jacob's pet brag that he hailed from Taos, where he had been brought up on a nursing bottle filled with whisky instead of milk; and, furthermore, that he had frequently knocked down a Texan steer with a single blow of his huge fist.

Be that as it may, certain it was that the people of Big Brace, as a rule, stood in awe of him, and took good care not to incur his enmity.

A pal of Jug's, was a detestable customer, who rejoiced in the name of Sneaky Smith.

While, in most instances, Jake Jug was possessed of a sort of bull-dog bravery, Sneaky was exactly the contrary, being sly, treacherous and untrustworthy, and yet was an arrant coward, who clung to Jug for protection, as a child would to its parent.

That Jug could have anything to do with such a man was due to the fact that he frequently utilized Sneaky in a manner that brought either shekels or drinks to his individual benefit.

When a stranger of respectable appearance arrived in Big Brace, it was Jug's special delight to pick a quarrel with him, which generally resulted in a row, in which the giant had invariably come out best man; hence from the moment Bozeman Bill entered the Tallyho, he became a target for Jug's evil gaze, and after the giant had piled in several "hummers," and felt in prime fighting trim, he strode over to where the sport was seated.

Pausing a few feet from the man in white, in a half-crouching position, with arms akimbo, he leered at the sport, in a most provoking manner.

"Haow d'ye do, stranger?" he said, in a coarse, insolent way.

Bozeman Bill removed the cigar from his mouth, and coolly scrutinized the giant from head to foot.

"Haow d'ye do?" repeated Jug, with a more villainous leer.

For a moment the sport seemed to hesitate to make a reply, but only for a moment, for, suddenly rising, he planted the toe of his right shoe squarely in under Jacob's bearded chin.

"That's the how I do, sir!" he responded, and then coolly reseated himself, as though nothing had happened, while Jug toppled back to the floor, and with both hands clasped to his jaw, rolled over and over, howling with pain.

This act of Bozeman Bill at once created intense excitement, and expressions of astonishment from the spectators were heard on all sides.

That a man of Bill's physique should kick such a giant as Jake Jug was beyond their understanding and appeared to them like insanity.

Bozeman Bill, however, did not appear in the least disconcerted at what he had done, but went on smoking his cigar, leisurely.

He was interrupted, however, by feeling a hand upon his shoulder, and looking up, beheld a well-dressed, good-looking young man, with brown mustache, and curly hair, standing by his side.

"I trust you will excuse me, sir," the young man said, politely, "but I wish to say that it would be advisable for you to get out of sight before Jake Jug gets on his feet again."

Bozeman Bill surveyed his would-be friend a moment before he made reply.

"Why so?" he finally asked.

"Because Jug is one of the fiercest and most brutal ruffians in the camp, and he'll be sure to do you bodily harm when he recovers from the kick."

Bozeman Bill smiled, good-naturedly.

"I'm much obliged to you for your interest in my welfare," he replied, "but I don't think there's any danger that the fellow will kill anything but whisky."

"But you don't know him! He's a terror. Every one in the camp is afraid of him!"

"Then, all I have to say is that you must have a mighty brave population!" was the sarcastic rejoinder. "If I mistake not, I've kicked some of the bravado out of him. At any rate, I am able to take care of Number One!"

"Oh! well, all right. No harm done in giving you a friendly warning, I trust."

"None at all. Am very much obliged to you."

The young man then turned away, with a shrug of his shoulders, as much as to say that he did not place much faith in Bozeman Bill's ability to take the consequences of his rash act.

But the sport's assertion that Jug was not likely to kill any one, proved correct.

When the giant's pain had somewhat abated, he staggered to his feet, and stood a moment glaring savagely at the young stranger—then turned abruptly and sought the bar, where he proceeded to guzzle more fire-water.

Evidently Bozeman Bill had kicked the bravado out of him.

Nothing more of importance occurred until later in the evening, when two more strangers to the camp arrived at and entered the Tallyho.

They were Old Avalanche and Janet Earl, who had arrived somewhat later than they had expected, owing to Janet's horse becoming lame.

The presence of so pretty a girl as Janet, at the Tallyho, attracted even more attention than had the arrival of Bozeman Bill, and as Old Avalanche conducted her toward the office counter, the majority of the saloon habitués with one accord raised their hats respectfully.

"This young leddy wants ter secure 'commodations for a day or so, wi' a good safe room," the Annihilator said, addressing the colonel.

"I've just the place for her!" Corker said, smiling blandly. "Fine room, burglar proof, and nicely furnished; an' when you come down to vittles, I set the boss table in the West. Just inscribe your autograph in this 'ere register, miss, an' I'll show ye to yer room. After ye'r ready, ye can come down-stairs ag'in, an' cross this room to yonder door, an' enter ther dinin'-room, where you'll find a b'ilin' hot supper waitin' fer ye. Needn't be 'tall 'feard o' ther boyees, fer they won't molest you."

So Janet registered, after which the colonel gallantly took her sachel, and showed her to her room.

Avalanche, in the mean time, left the hotel, to look after the welfare of the horses, which he had left at the door.

After making her toilet, Janet went down-stairs, in quest of supper.

As she was crossing the floor of the big room, she was both amazed and horrified to find herself confronted by no less a personage than Jake Jug, the camp bully.

There was an evil glitter in his now bloodshot eyes, and a wicked grin upon his more than repulsive countenance.

"Ho! ho! but you're a daisy!" he said, with a coarse chuckle, "and I'm going to have er kiss from them 'ar cherry red lips!" and so saying, he sprang forward, and seized her in his arms.

She screamed and struggled desperately, but could not break away, when, suddenly Bozeman Bill put in an appearance, and with one blow

knocked Jake Jug down, causing him to release his hold.

The ruffian, however, quickly sprung to his feet, furious with rage, and the fire of murder in his eyes, but, as he was about to rush upon the sport, he made the discovery that that gentleman held a handsome cocked revolver in his grasp.

"Down on your knees, you big brute!" Bozeman Bill cried, sternly, "and beg the young lady's pardon, or by blazes, I'll put a bullet through your head!"

Jug gave the sport a glance of sullen defiance.

"Down! I tell you!" Bill cried, again. "I mean business!"

"Cuss ye, I'll git even with ye fer this!" Jug hissed, venomously, for he keenly felt his humiliating position, drunk as he was, but the man in white had the drop on him, and he well knew the prompt sport was just that sort of a chap who would do what he threatened.

So, with a muttered oath, he dropped upon his knees in front of Janet, and said:

"Young leddy, I beg yer parding, an' ax yer forgiveness, fer insultin' ye."

Then he made an attempt to arise; but, before he could do so there was an interruption.

There was a loud baa-a-a! and the next instant Jeremiah, the Annihilator's famous goat, bounded in, and with his knotty head, gave the bully a tremendous butt in the small of the back, that knocked him forward, flat upon his face.

Astounded and frightened, the ruffian yelled with pain, and scrambling to his feet he rushed for an open window, leaped out, and was seen no more that night in the Tallyho Saloon.

Jeremiah was the hero of the hour.

Thanking Bozeman Bill for his interference in her behalf, Janet hastened into the dining-room.

To say the least, she was not favorably impressed with Big Brace.

CHAPTER III.

WHO KILLED HINTON?

BOZEMAN BILL waited until he saw Janet return from the dining-room, and go up to her room; then he also sought his own apartment, and obtained a good night's rest.

He was up bright and early, and went down-stairs. Colonel Corker was on duty at the office counter, and there were already a goodly number of people in the saloon.

The colonel was a genial old fellow, and always tried to do what he could for the comfort of his guests, and was invariably bland and sociable.

After taking a short stroll out of doors over the "city," Bozeman Bill returned to the hotel, and approached the colonel.

"Could you tell me where I will find such a party as Harry Hinton?" he asked.

"Harry Hinton?" repeated the colonel. "Why, certainly, sir. That's the gentleman standing over yonder, by the window. Shall I call him?"

"Oh, no! I'll go and speak with him."

The person the colonel had indicated was the same curly-haired young man who had warned Bill to get out of the way of Jake Jug, the previous evening.

Approaching him, Bill drew a card from his pocket, and presented it.

It read as follows:

"BOZEMAN BILL,

Detective."

An expression of surprise came over the face of young Hinton, as he glanced at the card.

"Indeed?" he said, thoughtfully. "You come from Boise City, eh?"

"I was there, when your message to the sheriff came, and he sent me to attend to your wants," Bill replied.

"I am glad to meet you. I had no idea, last evening, that you were a detective."

"I dare say not. Still, that is my business."

"Come and sit down, and we will have a talk."

They sought an unoccupied table, in an obscure part of the room, and seated themselves, after which young Hinton produced some cigars.

"Have you had much experience as a detective?" he asked.

"Oh! yes, quite a little," Bill replied. "I have within the last year handled some pretty knotty jobs."

"Then, without doubt, you are the very man I want. I have a case to work up which is based merely on a suspicion. But, to find whether the suspicion is correct or not, great care must be taken, in order that certain parties

shall not know I am employing a detective. Were that known, measures might be adopted to thwart me."

"I understand. What is nature of your case?"

"Well, I will tell you."

"My father, up to the time of his death, was the wealthiest man in Big Brace. He owned the Hinton Mine, which is the best producing drift in this region, the ore mill, his own residence, and several other shanties, besides which he had a large amount of money locked up in his safe—just how much I am unable to say."

"My father was a rather eccentric man, in some respects, but, withal, a good parent to me—always kind and indulgent, and I, being his only son, he naturally thought the world of me."

"About a month ago, he died, very suddenly, and, as I believe, under suspicious circumstances."

"He was a man in the prime of life, robust, and the picture of good health; yet he was suddenly taken ill and died within half a day from the time he had last been seen upon the street."

"I was away, at the time, but returned as soon as the news of his death reached me, arriving too late to see my father's body, as he had been buried the day before."

"I supposed of course that I was his principal heir, and made preparations to take possession, but my step-mother informed me that she would not consent to that until it was ascertained whether a will had been left, or not."

"My father's safe was searched, and all the premises, but no will could be found. We then went to the only lawyer in the town, one Phineas Fink, and made inquiries, and found that my father had made a will and left it in Fink's care, about a month previous to his demise."

"It was surprising to me that father did not keep the will himself, for Fink was a notorious shyster, and no one places any confidence in his honesty."

"Well, the will was produced, and read, and to my astonishment, I found that I had been cut off with a single dollar. Everything else, mine, real estate, personal property, and money, had been bequeathed to my step-mother, whom father married only a year ago!"

"That is singular!" Bozeman Bill observed.

"Well you may say so, I was astounded, and at once declared the will a trumped-up job to defraud me out of my rights, but that is all the good it did. I couldn't prove that it was not my father's will, and could find no other, so I'm left out in the cold, disinherited."

"Did you see the will, Mr. Hinton?"

"I did."

"Was the signature like that your father usually employed?"

"Exactly. He always signed his name in a very odd style of chirography, and the signature appended was exactly like his."

"Up to the time of your father's death, were you and your step-mother on good terms?"

"No. We were never on good terms. She appeared to regard me with aversion, from the hour of our first meeting, and I can't say that I had any liking for her."

"She is now in possession of the estate?"

"Yes."

"It is your suspicion then, that the will is a forgery?"

"It certainly is. And, not that alone, but I also believe that my father was a victim of foul play."

"What causes you to think this?"

"Well, several things. Only a few hours before his death he was upon the street, a strong and healthy man. Nothing was known outside of his house, that he was ill, until he was dead. No doctor was sent for, although there was one in the camp."

"Of how many persons did your father's household consist?"

"Five—my father, my step-mother, my father's brother, myself, and a female servant."

"What has your step-mother to say, in regard to your father's death?"

"She claims that when he came to dinner, he complained of a sharp pain, in the region of his heart. After dinner he laid down on the lounge, and went to sleep, and slept till late in the afternoon—something unusual for him—when he suddenly awakened with a sharp cry of pain, and almost immediately expired."

"Was no effort made to ascertain the cause of his death?"

"It appears not. Of course there is no coroner in this camp, and the general supposition was that he died of heart disease."

"Are you alone in your suspicion of foul play?"

"I think not. There are quite a number who

have hinted to me that in their opinion, there was something suspicious and mysterious concerning the suddenness of his death."

"How soon after death, was your father buried?"

"The next forenoon."

"Are there any more circumstances, on which you base your suspicions?"

"There are."

"What are they?"

"Well, in the first place, it appears that my father was buried in his best suit. On my return, having occasion to search through the house, in quest of the will, I made the discovery that his every-day business suit was missing. Surely, it does not look reasonable that he would have been buried with two suits of clothes on."

"I should think not. What is your theory?"

"That my father was stabbed, while he slept, and the blood-stained suit burned up."

Bozeman Bill whistled softly, and stroked his blonde mustache.

"Have you confided this matter of the missing suit to any one?" he asked.

"No. I have kept my own counsel. I didn't even mention the discovery to my step-mother. Another thing that strikes me unfavorably, is this:

"My uncle, Horace Hinton, has heretofore been a professional gambler, and although he had a room in my father's house, he and father were never on good terms. Since father's death my step-mother has made Horace her business manager, and superintendent of the mine, and the gossips of the camp are whispering it about that it is not unlikely that he and my step-mother will eventually become man and wife."

"Ah!"

This much Bozeman Bill uttered, and then relapsed into silence, apparently turning the matter over in his mind.

"What was your step-mother's maiden name?" he finally asked.

"Alecia Le Clair."

"Of French descent, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"How old?"

"About thirty years."

"Where did your father meet and marry her?"

"In Chicago."

"What kind of a looking man is your uncle, Horace Hinton?"

"He is a large built man, and—ah! there he is, now. You can see for yourself!"

A man had just entered the saloon, and was making his way toward the bar.

He was tall and heavily proportioned, and rather genteel of dress.

His face was dark in complexion, and not particularly good looking. His eyes were jet-black, and his heavy mustache and closely cropped hair were of the same hue.

A sinister expression lurking about the eyes would be apt to impress one that he was not a man of the finest scruples.

"So that's your uncle, eh?" Bozeman Bill queried, after taking a good look at the man.

"Yes, that's the man. He's one of the most expert cards sharps in the West."

"He looks like a gambler. Are you two friends?"

"No, indeed! We do not even speak to each other."

Horace Hinton procured a drink at the bar, and then, in turning around appeared to discover his nephew and Bozeman Bill, for he stood a moment gazing toward them.

Then, he seated himself at a table, facing them, and picking up a paper, made a pretense of reading; but he glanced over the top of the paper, at them, every few seconds.

"He's watching us!" Harry commented. "I suppose he is wondering who you are, and what we are talking about."

"Let him wonder!" Bozeman Bill replied.

"That's all the good it will do him. Now, referring to your case, Mr. Hinton, supposing your parent was murdered—who do you suppose did the job?"

"Why, I should naturally lay the crime to my step-mother, as she was the one most benefited by the demise. I don't believe she ever cared a cent for father, but married him for his money."

"Would you suspect your uncle of being in collusion with her, in such an event?"

"Yes. They have always been rather intimate, since she came here, and the very fact of her making him her business manager goes to show that they understood each other, pretty well."

"Perhaps you are right. Where is your father buried?"

"Up the gulch, a ways. I will show you during the day, if you like."

"Very well. Now, then, what you want of me is to establish that your father was murdered, prove who the murderer was, and find out, if possible, if the will in existence is not a forgery?"

"Exactly. I will pay you your price whether you succeed or not. I have a little money of my own, and shall not be close in a matter like this. I will pay you a hundred dollars down, if you like."

"Keep your money. I have plenty for my present needs. I will think the case over, and see you later. You will excuse me, now, while I get some breakfast."

"Certainly!"

Then, after a few more words, Bozeman Bill sought the dining room, Janet Earl having preceded him a few minutes."

CHAPTER IV.

THE WIDOW'S VISITOR.

HAMILTON HINTON, was, prior to his death, one of the most influential men in Big Brace, and the wealthiest.

He owned the Hinton Mine, individually, and although no one positively knew, it was generally supposed that he had a large fortune in ready cash stored away in his safe.

His residence, which was a commodious affair, and had only been built about a year, was a fine looking frame dwelling, tastefully painted, modern of design, and supplied with piazzas and balconies.

It was surrounded by a tasty fence, and the grounds were ornamented with flowers, shrubs and conservatory plants—all of which was a novelty in that wild region.

The house was nicely furnished, the whole appointments having been imported from an Eastern city.

When Bozeman Bill entered the dining-room, after leaving Harry Hinton, he found the long main table surrounded by a full complement of hungry miners, citizens and guests of the house, so that there was no vacant seat for him, and was about to retreat to the barroom, when a colored waiter approached him.

"Step right dis way, sah!" he said. "De young lady says you can hab a seat at her table, sah."

He led the way to a round table at which Janet was seated, at the further end of the room. She welcomed the detective, with a smile.

"There is plenty room for you, here, sir," she said, "and I will be happy to have you breakfast with me."

"Thank you," Bill said. "I shall be only too glad to avail myself of your kind offer."

He seated himself, and gave his order, and he and Janet were soon chatting quite sociably.

"I shall be afraid to step out of doors, for fear of encountering that ruffian who assaulted me, last night," Janet said, after they had conversed awhile.

"Have no fear of him!" Bill replied. "I don't believe he will attempt to molest you again. If he does, level a revolver at him, and he'll let you alone."

"But, I have no revolver."

"I will give you one. I have a small one in my pocket, which will just answer your purpose," and producing it, Bill handed it to her.

"Do you know how to fire it?"

"Oh! yes. I have fired one off a number of times."

"Then you're all right. If Jake Jug approaches you, point this at him and he'll mighty quick haul off."

"Very well; I will follow your advice. You are very kind, and if you will name the price, I will pay you for this weapon."

"Don't think of such a thing. I make it a present to you, for I have a pair of my own, of larger caliber, and of somewhat different pattern."

Breakfast over, Janet returned to her room, while the detective left the hotel for a further stroll about town.

During the forenoon, Janet came down-stairs, attired for the street, and looking inexpressibly charming.

Colonel Corker presided behind the office counter, and she approached him rather timidly.

"I would like to inquire, sir, if you can direct me to the office of Mr. John Jones, the lawyer," Janet said, as she finished buttoning her gloves.

"Mr. who?" queried the colonel, his heart fluttering like a schoolboy's as he gazed upon the vision of loveliness before him.

"Mr. John Jones, the lawyer, sir," Janet repeated.

"Jones? Jones?" repeated the colonel, reflectively. "Why really, miss, I know of no such person. You say he is a lawyer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see: Jones, eh? Jones, a lawyer! No, I am positive there is no such a person in Big Brace."

"Indeed!" And Janet began to feel uneasy, as she remembered what Old Avalanche had hinted at while they were on their way to the camp. "Perhaps you are not acquainted—"

"Tut! tut! miss. I know every man, woman and child in this camp, 'cept possibly a few that have come within a day or so, and I'll swear to it, I don't know of any John Jones. You've likely made a mistake in the name. The only lawyer in Big Brace, is Phineas Fink, whose office is across the street, up stairs."

"But, sir, while I was in Chicago, I received a letter from this place, signed by John Jones, which summoned me here, to attend to some business matters?"

The colonel closed one eye and whistled softly.

"That's strange," he declared. "Perhaps if you inquire of some one else you may succeed in locating your man, but I'll be blamed if I know anything of him."

"I am sure it is very singular that I should receive a letter from such a party, and yet not be able to find him," Janet said. "There is another matter I would like to inquire about, if it will not be putting you to too much trouble?"

"No trouble at all, miss! In fact, it is a supreme pleasure to answer questions to one so fair as you."

Janet paid no attention to the intended compliment but went on:

"I understand that a gentleman of this place, named Mr. Hinton, recently died?" she said.

"Yes'm!"

"Did he leave any family?"

"Yes'm—a widder, who was his second wife, and a son."

"Could you direct me to the Hinton residence, sir?"

"With pleasure. Just step to the door and I will p'int it out to you," and vaulting over the counter as spry as a dry-goods clerk, the colonel led the way and pointed out a stylish-looking dwelling a short distance away.

"That's the Hinton place," he said, "and there's where the widder hangs up her night-cap."

Thanking him Janet descended the steps to the street and made her way toward the residence in question, but not without misgivings.

What would be her reception?

Had she been decoyed here to Big Brace for some evil purpose by some designing villain?

If not, why was she not able to learn something in regard to the John Jones who had written her?

Surely, as a man of prominence in the town, Colonel Corker ought to know whether there was such a person as Jones or not.

When Janet reached the Hinton residence she rung the bell and awaited an answer to the summons.

"I'll be brave!" she said to herself, "and not let on but what I'm positive that I am Mr. Hinton's heiress, whether I really am or not."

The door presently opened and a servant-girl appeared.

"I called to see Mrs. Hinton?" Janet simply said.

"Walk right in, miss, an' take a sate in the parlor, an' I'll be afther callin' her!" replied the servant, and Janet was ushered into the parlor, which was furnished better than many an Eastern home.

The servant disappeared and a few minutes later Mrs. Hinton entered.

She was a tall, well-formed woman of thirty or thereabouts, with a haughty carriage, cold, pale features, grayish eyes and light-brown hair.

It could not be said that she was particularly handsome, nor was she homely.

There was a certain something, however, rather repellent—something in her cold countenance that suggested the worldly woman in the fullest meaning of the word.

She seated herself in an easy-chair and glanced at Janet inquiringly.

"Did you wish to see me, miss?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Janet replied. "I am Janet Earl."

"Janet Earl!" repeated Mrs. Hinton. "Why I don't know that I know you, miss. Have we ever met before?"

"Not that I am aware of, ma'am. Perhaps Mr. Hinton never spoke to you of me?"

"No, I am sure he did not. So you were an acquaintance of my late husband?"

"I suppose from advices I have received, ma'am, that I am his heiress."

"His heiress?" and Mrs. Hinton looked her surprise.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why, surely, my dear young lady, you must be out of your head!"

"But, I am not!" Janet said, spiritedly. "I have been notified that Mr. Hinton left me the bulk of his fortune, and was requested to come on and take charge of it. So, I am here."

Mrs. Hinton burst into a fit of laughter.

"Well, upon my word; this is the funniest thing I ever heard of," she said. "Why, my dear child, my husband, by his last will, made me his sole legatee. How utterly absurd for you, a total stranger, to come here, expecting to lay claim to my husband's estate!"

"I came here at the solicitation of a lawyer," Janet replied. "Please read that!" and taking from her pocket a crumpled letter, Miss Earl handed it to the widow.

Betraying some agitation, she carefully withdrew the letter from the envelope, first glancing at the "receipt" post-mark on the back.

"You are from Chicago?" she observed.

"Yes, ma'am," responded Janet.

The widow unfolded the sheet of paper, and glanced over the contents, which were as follows:

"BIG BRACE, I. T., May 1st.

"TO MISS JANET EARL,

"No. — Madison street, Chicago, Ill.:—

"DEAR LADY:—As the attorney and counselor of Mr. Hamilton Hinton, of Big Brace, Idaho, it becomes my duty to give you notification that the aforesaid Mr. Hinton, whom you saved from being robbed, in Chicago, about a year ago, is dead, and his last will and testament which he left in my hands bequeaths to you the bulk of his large fortune.

"You will please come to Big Brace, to assist in settling up the estate, and assume possession of that which you have inherited. Yours, respectfully,

"JOHN JONES,

"Attorney & Counselor at Law."

The countenance of the Widow Hinton was the seat of varying expressions, as she perused the letter and then went over it, for a second time.

"This is very strange," she said, finally, looking at Janet, "and as inconsistent as it is strange. In the first place, there is but one lawyer in Big Brace, and his name is Phineas Fink. He drew up my late husband's last will, only a month before his death.

"It is evident that you have been lured here by some evil disposed person, for no good purpose, for certain it is that my husband never left you a cent."

"Mr. Hinton told me, after I prevented his being robbed in Chicago, that he would remember me in his will!" ventured Janet.

"Oh! that may be, but it amounted to nothing. The late Mr. Hinton was an eccentric person, and frequently made promises that he forgot immediately afterward. No, Miss Earl, it is plain that you have come all the way from Chicago on a wild goose chase, and I would advise you to return at once, lest you fall into the hands of the unscrupulous person who lured you here. I am sorry for you, and if you need any pecuniary assistance I will gladly extend it."

"Thank you, but I have plenty of means for my immediate use. I shall not return eastward, just yet. Have you your husband's will, madam?"

"I have."

"Will you permit me to read it?"

Mrs. Hinton gave her visitor a keen glance.

"What do you want to read it for?" she asked.

"Oh! out of curiosity!"

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let you read it, providing you will let me copy this letter of yours."

"Why do you wish to copy it?"

"Because I am desirous, for our mutual benefit, of finding out who this John Jones is."

"Very well. Let me see the will and you may copy the letter."

Mrs. Hinton arose and proceeding to the family room adjoining the parlor, soon returned with the will, and gave it to Janet.

Then, with pen, ink and paper, she seated herself at a table, and began to copy John Jones's letter, seemingly endeavoring to reproduce a perfect fac-simile of it.

Janet read the will carefully through, and then laid it on the table.

Mrs. Hinton immediately arose, took the docu-

ment, then resumed her writing, and soon had the letter copied.

She folded up both the original and the copy, so that they looked alike, and handed Janet the latter.

Janet unfolded it, and discovered the change. "You've made a mistake, and given me the copy," she said.

"I guess not," was the cool reply. "I have the copy myself."

"You are mistaken," Janet replied, firmly. "I detected the difference at a glance. We will exchange."

"We will do nothing of the sort," Mrs. Hinton retorted. "One paper is as good as the other, and as it cannot possibly make any difference which you have, I prefer to retain the one I possess."

"It does make a great deal of difference to me," Janet quickly declared. "I want the original letter, Mrs. Hinton!"

"You've got it!"

"I have not!"

"You lie!"

Janet flushed with indignation.

"I do not lie!" she cried. "I want that letter!"

"Do you?" said Mrs. Hinton, with an aggressive sneer. "Well, let me see you get it!"

For a moment Janet was nonplused.

She did not want to lose the letter under any consideration, and was both surprised and angered at the widow's strange conduct.

What should she do to regain possession of the original letter?

A sudden thought flashed across her mind.

Reaching into her pocket she drew forth the revolver Bozeman Bill had given her, and cocking it, she leveled it direct at the widow.

"Now, ma'am," she said, "I'll take that paper, if you please, or I will shoot you and get forcible possession of it! I mean business!"

"You hussy, put up that weapon!" fairly screamed Mrs. Hinton, both angered and alarmed. "I'll have you arrested!"

"Bah!" retorted Janet, contemptuously. "Do you see that clock on the mantle? Well, I'll give you just two minutes to hand over that paper. Refuse at your peril!"

The widow saw that Janet meant just what she said; so, thrusting her hand into her pocket, she cast the original missive at Janet's feet.

"Now get out of my house, or I'll have you kicked out!" she cried.

"Thank you. You need not go to that trouble," Janet answered bravely. "You may call this your house just at present, for they say possession is nine-tenths of the law; but remember that I consider myself an heiress to at least a portion of the late Mr. Hinton's fortune, and if I can do so, I shall eventually dispossess you of these premises."

And so saying, Janet backed to the door, still keeping the widow covered, and then left the house.

CHAPTER V.

THE ANXIOUS CONFERENCE.

WHEN Janet had departed, Mrs. Hinton paced to and fro across the softly-carpeted floor of the parlor, white with the passionate rage she tried hard to suppress.

Hers was one of those nervous temperaments which, when not kept under restraint, so preyed upon her general system when excited as to throw her into a fit of sickness. Try though she now did, she found it impossible to control her passion, thoroughly aroused by the defeat sustained at the hands of Janet Earl.

"May all the imps of Satan seize that girl!" she hissed, as she paced to and fro with flashing eyes and clinched hands. "The idea of her coming here, thinking to usurp my rights! Why, I never heard of such a piece of audacity in all my life! Does she think I am a woman to brook such presumption? If she does, she will find out that she is making a sorry mistake!"

She continued to pace to and fro until she got her rage somewhat more under control; then she touched a bell, and Bridget, the servant-woman, presently entered the room.

"Bridget," the widow said, "I want you to put on your sun-bonnet, go and find Horace, and tell him I want to see him. If you are quick about it, I'll give you a quarter on your return."

"Sure, mum, I'll not be gone foive minutes," Bridget replied—"pervidin' I can foind the gintleman."

"You will likely find him at the Tallyho. Anyhow, inquire there first."

Bridget hurried away, and then Mrs. Hinton seated herself and read the copy of the letter she

had but recently made, and which Janet had thrown upon the floor.

"Strange! strange!" she muttered, "who could have written this letter to the girl, for evidently it was written by some one here in Big Brace, and sent on to Chicago to her, as she claims. I remember now that Hamilton once mentioned having met such a girl in Chicago, prior to our marriage, but he never made mention of any intention of leaving her any money. It cannot be possible that there is another will in existence than the one I possess?"

Spreading the will on the table in front of her, she carefully compared its chirography with that of the attempted fac-simile of John Jones's letter.

"No, there is no resemblance between the writing of Phineas Fink and that of this so-called Jones, that I can detect. I didn't know but what Fink might be trying to play a double game, but this don't look like it."

A few minutes later Horace Hinton made his appearance in the parlor.

"Did you send for me, Alecia?" he asked, taking a seat near her.

"Yes, Horace," was the reply. "Something has happened that gives me great uneasiness."

"So I would infer, for you are very pale. What is the matter?"

"Something that will no doubt surprise you as much as it has me. Read this!" and she handed him the copy she had made of John Jones's letter.

He gave it a careful perusal, his face expressing great astonishment.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"It is a copy of the original letter, which the possessor, one Janet Earl, allowed me to make," Mrs. Hinton responded.

She then told of the visit from Janet, touching on all the particulars of said interview.

Horace Hinton listened with darkening countenance, at the same time studying the copy of John Jones's letter.

"Is this a fac-simile of the original letter?" he asked.

"As near as I could make, and you are aware that I am no novice with the pen," the widow replied. "Do you notice any resemblance in it to Phineas Fink's style of chirography?"

"No. He never wrote this letter, that's flat."

"Then, who did?"

"I'll give it up."

"Is there any lawyer in Big Brace named John Jones?"

"No, nor any one else of that name, so far as I know."

"Then, how do you account for the letter? Do you think it is a forgery?"

"Evidently not. Did you examine the post-mark?"

"Yes; it was posted in Big Brace, and was sent to Chicago, for there was a receiving stamp mark on the back of the envelope. What time did this Janet Earl first make her appearance in Big Brace?"

"Last evening. She came in company with an old scout called Old Avalanche, who had evidently acted as her escort to this camp. They are both putting up at the Tallyho."

"Well, what do you think of the matter?" the widow asked.

"It strikes me, so far as I can judge, that matters have a bad outlook. If the girl is not an adventuress—and she don't have the appearance of being one, she has evidently been sent for by some person unknown to us, for a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"What more natural than that some one wants to corral a portion of my brother's inheritance?"

"But, how would such a schemer know of this girl away off in Chicago, and select her as the tool with which to work out this scheme?"

"Oh, Ham may have mentioned her, prior to his death, you see, and thereby given a foundation for the plot."

"Did he ever speak to her, to you?"

"Yes, and in glowing terms, at that."

"But, did not say he intended to leave her anything I hope?"

"No."

"Do you think it possible that another will is in existence, Horace?"

"I don't know how to think, in regard to that. If there was another will, I should have supposed it would have been left in Fink's hands, since we can find no trace of it, anywhere else."

"Then you feel positive that Fink is square, and all right?"

"Yes. It wouldn't be to his advantage to be otherwise. Why, isn't he getting enough to

pay him to deal square? Of course he is, and you can bet he is not so much of a fool but what he knows when his nest is well feathered."

"He's no doubt smart enough. The question is if he is not too smart for those who depend upon him."

"Pshaw! Don't fret about him! I'll go a hundred he is all right. Even were he inclined to be crooked. I have some doubts if my brother would have trusted in him to any considerable extent, for you know Ham was of a suspicious nature, naturally. I'm fully satisfied to this extent—if this girl was brought on here to be trumped up as an heir, Fink has no hand in it, and in case there is another will in existence, he knows nothing about it."

"What then, is to be done? Are we not in danger of being involved in trouble?"

"Possibly, unless we make preventive moves, in advance. To tell the truth, I don't like the outlook, myself; but then, we can't well strike in self-defense, until we know just where to strike, and why we strike. This girl may be in collusion with the so-called Jones, and should anything happen to her, there might follow an exposure that would make things exceedingly warm for us. So, what is done must not be accomplished until after deliberate judgment. When she called, you ridiculed the idea of her being an heiress to my brother's estate?"

"Certainly, and tried to convince her that she had been lured here by some designing person, who meant her harm. I even advised her to set out at once on her return home, and volunteered to defray her expenses if she would go."

"And she refused, eh?" Horace Hinton demanded.

"Yes, she refused, saying that she should not go East, until the matter was investigated, and that, though I held possession now, she would try to dispossess me, if it lay in her power, or words to that effect."

"Indeed! Then I should judge that she means business, and is therefore dangerous to our mutual interests. Did she mention of having any knowledge of Harry's existence?"

"No. Why?"

"Because, I believe the young whelp means to make us trouble, if he can. You know he told us, point-blank, that he believed the will to be a forgery, and that he should try to get his rights."

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, last evening, there arrived in camp, from Boise City, a young man who registered as Bozeman Bill. He is quite a dandified chap, dressed in white duck, wears diamonds, and besides handling his fists like a prize-fighter, has a rather detective cut of jib. This morning I saw him and Harry Hinton holding what appeared to be an interested and confidential conversation together, and it at once occurred to me that Harry had secured the services of a detective, and that this Bozeman Bill was the man."

"Did you gain any positive evidence, more than simple supposition?"

"No. I have not been able to speak with the sport, yet. But, I intend to, and to watch him, and if I find he has come here to snoop into our affairs, I'll have him put out of the way in short order, and Harry and the girl, in the bargain."

"Of course. Something of the sort must be done, for it won't do to run any risks, at this late stage in the game," Mrs. Hinton asserted, anxiously.

"Right you are, Alecia—right you are. And, what is more, I am growing impatient to have you keep your promise to me."

"You must not be impatient, Horace. You know Hamilton has only been dead a month, and if I were to marry you so soon after his death, it would be likely to create a talk that would result disastrously, perhaps, to our mutual interests, especially considering the way matters now stand."

"Well, maybe you are right. But, should anything occur to necessitate our leaving here on short notice, I shall expect you to marry me, and divide the money, according to our previous agreement."

"Which of course, I would do. If we experience no trouble from the present menacing source, I will also agree to a union at the expiration of another month."

"Very well. I will see to it that no such trouble arises," Horace said, arising. "I will take this matter into my own hands, and find out the truth about it, so that you need experience no annoyance, my fair Alecia."

"If any one calls to see me?"

"Make it a point to not be troubled by receiving callers, on the plea of illness. It will be better thus, for you might unwittingly give

something away that would be detrimental to our interests, and which would make it bad for us."

"Very well. I will act upon your advice," the widow said.

Horace Hinton bade her good-morning and took his departure.

CHAPTER VI.

DEADWOOD DICK JUNIOR TAKES A NEW CASE.

WHEN Janet Earl left the Hinton residence she took her way slowly back toward the Tallyho Hotel, with a very serious expression of countenance.

"I wonder if I have been deceived and entrapped?" she mused, "and if the widow will attempt to make me trouble? I can't help it, if she does. I was determined to have back the letter, at all hazards. But, after all, what good is it going to do me? No one appears to know such a person as John Jones, and it really looks as if I had been lured here on a wild goose chase. Yet, who could have lured me? Mr. Hinton, who is dead, was the only person here whom I knew anything about in Big Brace, prior to my arrival here; and who else should have known anything about me, except he told them? And if he did leave directions for anyone to write to me, it looks reasonable to suppose that he had some good reason for doing so. I can believe nothing else, and whoever wrote the note is either in Big Brace or in some place not far away, and if I have a little patience I will learn more about this matter than I know at present—that I solemnly believe."

When she entered the hotel office, Janet glanced about the apartment, in hopes of seeing Old Avalanche, but the veteran Annihilator was nowhere to be seen.

This was a disappointment to Janet, for she desired to have a talk with him, whom she had learned to like and trust implicitly.

She went up to her room, to deliberate as best she could what would be best for her to do.

As she entered her room she made what was to her a most unwelcome and startling discovery; the window was raised, and her sachel, which she had brought with her to Big Brace, was missing!

When she had left her room, after breakfast that morning, to visit Mrs. Hinton, the window had been closed and fastened on the inside, and her sachel stood at the foot of the bed.

She had taken particular pains to lock the door, as all the money she possessed in the wide world was in the sachel, she considering it safer there than in her pocket, in case anything should happen to her.

But, now, both the sachel and money were gone, and she realized that she was left a comparative stranger, in a strange, rough town, without a cent to fall back on to defray her immediate expenses.

The realization of this loss fairly drove her distracted.

Here she was, far away from home and friends, with no way of getting back to them, and little or no prospect of getting proper work.

What was she to do?

She hastily searched the room, but all in vain.

Her sachel was indeed gone!

She looked out of the window, and saw that it opened out upon a rear porch; but how a burglar could have gained entrance to her room from this direction, when her window had been left securely fastened on the inside, was more than she could understand.

It was to her an inexplicable mystery.

Finally, thoroughly disheartened, and ready to cry, she went down to the office, and laid the case before Colonel Corker, the landlord.

The colonel had evidently been drinking and was not in the best of humor, for he listened to her in a drowsy sort of way, without manifesting much concern.

"Well, if you've lost your baggage, through a burglar's breakin' into yer room," he said, "you can't blame me, fer I had nothing to do with it. No burglar didn't come down here wif yer traps, or I'd 'a' seen-an' stopped him. Reckon yer loss can't be werry heavy, fer yer sachel wasn't big enough to hold much."

"It is not the few clothes I lost," replied Janet, "but every cent of money I have in the world, was in the sachel."

"How much?"

"A hundred dollars."

"Humph! That's not much!"

"But it is a great deal for me to lose."

"Can't help that, young lady. There's a notice on yer door to the effect that I won't be responsible for vallybles not left at this offis."

"Then, I suppose that is equivalent to saying that, having been robbed of my money, I am no longer welcome as a guest of the house, until I can find some way of raising some more means?"

"Yas, that's about the size of it, miss. Sorry fer you, if that will do you any good, but, ye see, the terms o' this shebang aire cash, an' as I can easy fill all o' my rooms wif cash customers et don't pay one to deal fer credit."

Janet bowed coldly, and her lip quivering with the emotion she tried to suppress, she turned away, and left the hotel.

She wandered up the gulch, until she was beyond the outskirts of the camp, where she seated herself upon a boulder and burst into tears.

"Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do, now? Oh! why did I ever come so far away from home, to this town, where I have no friends?"

"Say not so, Miss Earl," responded a voice, near at hand, "for one is here who would esteem it an honor to be your friend."

Janet looked around, with a start, and saw, much to her surprise, that Deadwood Dick, Junior, was standing, with folded arms, only a few yards away.

She recognized him at once, for his appearance was the same as when she and Avalanche had encountered him on the trail.

"Be not alarmed, Miss Earl," he continued, coming nearer, "for you have naught to fear from me. Do you recognize me?"

"You are the gentleman who set Old Avalanche free, day before yesterday?"

"I am—Deadwood Dick, Junior, at your service. You appear distressed over something. Might I make bold to inquire as to the cause of your grief?"

"Oh! sir, I have met with a great misfortune—or, at any rate, it is a great one for me to incur. While I was absent from my room, this morning, a burglar broke into my room and stole my sachel, in which I had placed all the money I have in the world, and I am now penniless, and friendless, and was told a few minutes ago, that I could no longer stop at the hotel."

Deadwood Dick, Jr., gave a whistle of surprise, while Janet once more burst into tears.

"Don't cry, lady," Dick said, coming nearer. "Very true, you are in hard luck, but there is no occasion to give way to grief—not when I am about. Rest assured I will gladly assist you out of your trouble. How much money did you lose, Miss Earl?"

"A hundred dollars, sir. But you must excuse me, sir—I could not think of accepting money of you, a perfect stranger."

For Deadwood Dick, Jr., had drawn a roll of bills from his pocket and tossed it into her lap.

"Tut! tut!" he replied, "you are welcome to what there is in that roll, and if you need more, do not hesitate to ask for it."

"But, sir, you are a stranger to me, and I don't know when I can repay all this money; for I see that there is a considerable sum here."

"No repayment will be asked or expected, Miss Earl, for it is a gift of friendship."

"I will accept it as a loan, sir, and at the earliest moment will return it with interest, and I wish to add that words fail to express my gratitude toward you for your kindness. If it would not be asking too much, I would like to look upon the face of my benefactor, so that should I meet him again under other circumstances, I would recognize him."

Deadwood Dick, Jr., hesitated a moment, as if undecided whether to grant the request or not.

"You have already met me unmasked, Miss Earl, but providing you will promise to keep my secret for a time, and will also tell me what brought you to this out-of-the-way camp, I will make myself known to you."

"Very well, sir. I shall do as you wish, sir. If you have any secret to confide, it will be safe in my care, and since you have been so very kind to me, I have no objections to tell you what brought me here to Big Brace."

"Thank you. As to my real name, it is Richard Bristol, otherwise Deadwood Dick, Junior, and as I told you on a former occasion, I am in the detective business. Since coming to Big Brace I have taken on another name, and when not fixed up as you see me now, I blossom forth as Bozeman Bill!"

"Indeed!" Janet exclaimed in surprise. "I never should have suspected that, for Bozeman Bill, when I saw him, wore blonde hair and mustache."

"That was merely a disguise."

"What brought you to Big Brace? Are you working up a case here?"

"Yes, or rather. I expect to. I came here for that purpose. And now, I am rather curious to

know whatever brought you to this rough camp?"

"Very well, I will tell you," Janet said, and accordingly she began by relating her meeting with Mr. Hamilton Hinton, of her subsequent receipt of John Jones's letter, and what had transpired since her arrival in Big Brace.

Bozeman Bill listened without interruption, and when Janet had finished her narration he said:

"Well, Miss Earl, you have treated me to a great surprise, and believe me, I am much interested in your case. There certainly is a mystery about it all, and if you will accept of my sincere friendship, I will endeavor to bring about a solution to this mystery. Will you allow me to see the letter you received from this John Jones?"

"Certainly, and if you can help me find out whether I really am an heir to any of Mr. Hinton's wealth, I shall be under deep obligations to you," Janet replied, as she handed him the letter.

"Rest assured I will do all I can for you," Bill declared.

He read the letter twice over and then returned it to her.

"It appears that the letter was sent to you from here," he said, "and also that there was an object in sending it, but just what the object was, is not apparent. Are you aware, Miss Earl, that Mr. Hinton has a son living in this town?"

"No, sir."

"Well, such is the case. He left a son, who is a pleasant young man, but it appears that he disinherited him, and left his fortune to his wife. Harry Hinton not only believes that the produced will is a forgery, but that his father's sudden death was due to foul play, as he was a strong, hearty man. So he sent to Boise City for a detective, and I was detailed to look into the matter."

"Have you learned anything to confirm Mr. Hinton's suspicions?" Janet asked.

"Nothing in particular, as I have not yet made any positive attempt at investigation. But, now that I also propose to undertake both your case and that of young Hinton, I shall give the matter my undivided attention."

"Do you propose to tell Mr. Hinton about me, sir?"

"I shall have to consider somewhat, before I could give you an answer to that question, Miss Earl; in other words, I shall have to have another talk with him, to draw forth his ideas, as to how he would look upon the claims of another, that must militate against his own. I believe him to be a nice young fellow, and think that if he was assured that you had a rightful interest in his father's estate, he would not object to your claiming it. As it is now, however, he suspects his step-mother and uncle of a conspiracy to defraud him out of his natural rights, and no one can blame him for wishing to have the matter thoroughly sifted."

"Certainly not. Perhaps it would be best for me to return quietly to Chicago, so that I will not be in Mr. Hinton's way!"

"By no means. You must remain here, for a while, at least, until I have time to get fairly at this case, and investigate it. I will keep you posted in regard to my success, and will also try to run down the thief who stole your sachel. And, as long as I remain in Big Brace, you need have no fear but what in me you have a true friend, who will stand by you through thick and thin!"

"You are very kind, sir, and I fear I am incapable of expressing the full sense of my gratitude toward you."

"Don't try, for I do not ask it. Whatever I may be able to do for you, I do cheerfully, and without expectations of thanks or other payment. I will try to find out who the author of this letter is, which you received in Chicago, providing you will let me have it for a few days, and if I succeed in solving that question, I do not anticipate that it will be a difficult matter to find out whether there is really anything coming to you or not. And, now, I would advise you to return to the hotel, for if Mrs. Hinton and Horace are really the arch-schemers that Harry believes them to be, they will make some effort to do you injury, and it is best for you to be constantly on your guard when I am not around. Keep your money about your person, as it will be safer so to do, and if any one attempts to trouble you, do not hesitate to use your revolver, as no law is recognized here against the free use of weapons."

Janet promised to act as he suggested and then, after a few more words, Dick took his departure, going in an opposite direction from Big

Brace, while Janet arose and made her way leisurely back toward that bustling camp.

Neither she nor Dick had an idea that there had been an eavesdropper near, during their interview, who had overheard every word that had been uttered—a man, grim and sinister, who had stolen silently into a clump of bushes, just back of where Janet had been seated; a man with evil gleaming eyes, and hard set jaws, and whose facial expression grew harder and more savage as he listened.

And this man, who was thus playing the spy, was none other than Janet's now bitter enemy, who meant her mischief—Horace Hinton!

CHAPTER VII.

WASTED ADVICE.

DEADWOOD DICK JUNIOR, after parting with Janet, continued on up the gulch for about a mile and a half, and then turning up into the hills came to an isolated cabin, set down in a dense grove of evergreens.

No one not taking the pains to penetrate into the heart of grove or motte, would have suspected the existence of a habitation there, so snugly was it hidden away.

It had probably been built by some hunter, or sanguine prospector, who had afterward abandoned it, for its only furniture was a couple of rude stools.

Entering the cabin, Dick produced a sachel from under a floor board, and proceeded to once more make up as Bozeman Bill, an operation that occupied but a short time, when he set out on his return to Big Brace.

Again there, he looked around a while in quest of Harry Hinton, but failing to find him, entered the Tallyho and took a seat at one of the tables, where he spent some time in deliberating over matters that had now become somewhat complicated.

Just how and where to begin, was the puzzle to solve. Such a case he had never tackled before.

He was thus meditating and so deeply absorbed as to not pay any attention to what was going on in his immediate vicinity, when he felt a slight tap on his shoulder, and looking up, beheld Horace Hinton standing close at hand.

"Excuse me," he said, "for interrupting you, but I'd like to have a few words with you, sir, if it will not be too much of a bother," and his manner and tone were most pleasant.

Although somewhat surprised, Bozeman Bill at once replied:

"Very well, sir; I am at your service. Take a seat."

Horace Hinton seated himself on the opposite side of the table, appearing gratified at not being refused an interview.

He laid cigars and matches on the table as he became seated.

"Have a smoke," he said. "These weeds are something a little better than the average, as I imported them for my own use."

Thanking him, Bill lit one of the cigars, and then, after a moment, during which he lit his own cigar, Horace Hinton said:

"I presume, being a stranger in this camp, you do not know who I am. My name is Horace Hinton, and I am superintendent of the Hinton Mine, which my deceased brother left to his wife. I am also her business manager, and a person of great influence here in Big Brace."

"Well, it comes in handy to be an influential citizen, sometimes," Bill replied, rather disinterestedly.

"Indeed it does," returned Hinton, with enthusiasm. "Not so much as regards myself, but I'm one of those men who like to be able to help others. I am rather peculiar in my likes and dislikes, and form my opinions hastily—still rarely go wrong. I saw you in conversation with my nephew this morning, and was unusually favorably impressed with your appearance. Says I to myself: 'There's a stranger to this camp; looks square as a cube, and still don't know the pitfalls that lie in his path. It will be but common civility in me to give him a little friendly warning, and if he is looking for a fortune, perhaps I may be able to put him on the right track.' This was what I said to myself."

"Well, I studied you awhile, without your knowledge, and became convinced that I was in the right; then I went over to the colonel, and asked him what he thought of you. The colonel is a deep man, and a keen judge of human character. Well, he remained silent awhile, and then said he thought you would be a good man to pard with, even if you were a little green in regard to life in the mines."

"So I made up my mind that I would come to you and give you a little advice on some

points; and if you are in need of pecuniary assistance, I may be able to help you."

"Your offer is appreciated, sir," Bill replied; "but there is no necessity in particular of my accepting it. I have plenty of means for my immediate use, and did not come to Big Brace in search of employment."

"What did you come for, then?"

"Oh, on a matter of a little private business."

"So I presume, since you say so; but, what business?"

"That is a matter that must remain a secret to myself," Bill replied promptly and in an emphatic way, that must have made Hinton feel chagrined, for he flushed angrily.

"Well, you need not be so short and crabbed about it!" he growled. "You would find it better policy to be friendly and confidential with me."

"However that may be," responded Bill, "I prefer to say nothing about what brought me to Big Brace."

"Oh, well, for that matter, it is not imperatively necessary that you should, for I have already guessed that out."

"Indeed!"

"Exactly. I know you and of you, pretty near as well as you know yourself. You are a detective and sent here at the solicitation of my rascally nephew, Harry Hinton. You need not deny this, for it is useless. I know it to be a fact!"

"How do you know it?"

"That matters not. Suffice to say that I know it. Unfortunately, Harry is a wild and unscrupulous young devil, and when he found out that his past bad conduct had caused his father to disinherit him, he grew furious, and accused his step-mother and me of having entered into a conspiracy to defraud him, by trumping up a bogus will. Of course this is sheer and utter nonsense, as we stand ready to prove, through the medium of my brother's lawyer. So if you have come here to try to work up a case for your scaly client, you have come on a wild-goose chase!"

And Horace Hinton brought his fist down upon the table in a manner most emphatic.

Bozeman Bill smiled, quietly.

"Look out, or you'll damage your fist, Mr. Hinton," he said, unconcernedly. "It is not at all necessary to become so demonstrative. As to business matters, if I have any dealings with the younger Mr. Hinton that is my own affair, and cannot possibly interest outsiders."

"I have no hesitation in mentioning one motive, however, of my coming to your delectable camp!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Just this. For some little time this neighborhood, and the surrounding territory has suffered from the depredations of a lone highwayman and desperado-in-general, who styles himself Dark Demming. He has robbed stages and lone travelers, and even broken into stores, and the like, and, in fact, has been doing quite a wholesale business at his trade, so much so, that the matter has come to the notice of the Government, and they propose to suppress his funny ways. Therefore, I have been detailed to attend to the matter of running the fellow down."

Hinton laughed, scornfully.

"Bah!" he said, "I gave you credit for more sense than all that. Catch Dark Demming? Ha! ha! You'll have a jolly old time of it, let me tell you. It takes a man with hair on his teeth to do that. There's been lots of others who have tried it but failed, and their bones were found clean picked by the coyotes and buzzards."

"That don't scare me, in the least," Bill declared. "I'm not afraid of all the Dark Demmings in America, and once I get my hand on this particular one, I'll walk him to a cooler."

"Oh! no doubt!" Hinton retorted, ironically, as he arose from the table. "Since you are such an extraordinary fellow and possessed of such prowess and shrewdness, I don't see any use of my trying to give you points or counsel, as it was my intention to do!"

"Not the least use," Bill assured. "I am quite sure that I am capable of managing my own affairs without outside assistance, and while I court not your enmity, I prefer to be my own adviser in my private business matters."

"Oh! well, suit yourself," Horace Hinton rejoined. "I'm not your enemy, but I'll tell you one thing—I won't allow you to bother my brother's grief-stricken widow, by espousing Harry Hinton's cause. Please to remember that. And, another thing let me warn you of. You'll find my nephew an arrant knave and

rascal, and when you least expect it, he will turn on you, and get you into trouble. If he does, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"Oh! of course not, sir. Good-day!"

And rising, Bozeman Bill sauntered leisurely away down the room, apparently not in the least concerned at what had taken place.

Not so with Horace Hinton. His face grew dark with passion, and his hand clinched tightly.

"Curses seize the fellow!" he hissed. "I was not mistaken in my estimate of him. He is a cool, determined and dangerous enemy to our interests. I must see Alecia again, and then something must be done to get rid of this shadow on our path."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHOLESALE SCHEMING.

FOLLOWING up the resolution he had formed, Horace Hinton straightway sought the presence of the widow, and found her seated in her parlor reading.

Horace was just behind her, and looking over her shoulder, ere she discerned his presence.

"Aha! so you are making yourself acquainted with the peculiar mysteries of your future place of residence, are you?" he said, with a grim laugh.

The book was Dante's "Inferno!"

"Why not?" she replied. "When we travel, to-day, we naturally seek to become acquainted with the route, through the medium of a railway guide. This vision of Dante, prepares us for the future, and advises us of all the popular summer resorts!"

"I should prefer not to anticipate the future, dear Alecia," Horace replied. "We shall likely get enough of it, when the time comes! But, listen, now, for I have something of importance to tell you."

She signified her willingness to hear, whereupon he related to her all about overhearing the interview between Deadwood Dick, Junior, and Janet Earl, and subsequently, how he had interviewed the young detective, in his disguise of Bozeman Bill.

The widow listened without interruption, but it was plain to see that she was ill-at-ease.

"Well?" she asked when he had done, "what's to be done now? I thought you were going to attend to the matter, independent of me?"

"I could not resist the temptation of keeping you posted as to how things were working," he replied.

"You will see that some action must be taken, and that, too, without delay. This Bozeman Bill, alias Deadwood Dick Junior, and alias the devil-only-knows-who-else, intends to make an effort to break the present will that makes you owner of the estate, and in doing so he is working for the mutual interests of Janet and Harry. I believe he will try and have them meet and co-operate to defeat us. They are both young and of a susceptible age, and should such a thing happen that they should fall in love, their interests would then be mutual, and they could fight us all the stronger, which would be bad in the extreme."

"But what have they to work upon? Nothing except the girl's letter and Harry's suspicion, I am sure!"

"Even so, that is lots to begin on. Give one of these sleuth-hounds of the law the least clew to begin on, and they'll figure around until nine times out of ten they will unravel the whole scheme, and catch the plotters. Not that I say that either you or I are plotters, but it is best to avoid having any suspicion thrown upon us."

"Well, such being the case, what's to be done?"

"One of the first and most important things is to get rid of this devil, Bozeman Bill!"

"That ought to be easy enough."

"Easy enough to say, but not so easy done, by any means. He has got the strength of a Hercules, and the endurance and tenacity of an Indian; he is, I judge, an expert in the use of weapons, and literally fears nobody or nothing. Such a man as that certainly is dangerous to attack, single-handed, and it will be necessary to call strategy into requisition. Just how I shall manage it I have not concluded yet, but may give the job of putting him out of the way into the hands of Jake Jug and Sneaky Smith, who both hate and fear him."

"Can you trust them?"

"Of course I can. I've trusted them before and can do so again. All they want is money sufficient to keep them well supplied with grub and whisky—more especially the latter, and they will do anything I tell them."

"Well, do as you think best, but it would prove disastrous should they turn around and betray us."

"Don't fear for that. Jug owes the detective no good will, and he will be ripe for a chance to get square with him. And as for Sneaky Smith, he does just what Jake orders."

"They are two ruffians, at best, and I should say it would be best to fee them well for their work, would it not?"

"Well, yes. But I'll attend to all that. First of all, I've got another capital scheme to perfect, which, it strikes me, will have the desired effect. Let me have writing materials, and the copy you made of John Jones's letter to Janet."

Mrs. Hinton pointed to the writing-table which contained the articles he needed, and then handed him the desired copy.

Horace gave it a careful scrutiny, his brows knitting in perplexity, because he was sorely puzzled.

"I'd give a deal to know who wrote this!" he growled. "You said this was a good *fac-simile* of the original?"

"As nearly so as an expert could make it."

"Strange! strange! Who could have sent for the girl, unless they were acquainted with the circumstances of her meeting with my brother, and proposed to set her up as a candidate for the inheritance? But if such is the case, why don't the party who sent for her come forward and claim her?"

"Perhaps Harry sent for her?"

"Pshaw, no! They have not met yet, and do not know each other."

"Maybe you sent for her?" the widow suggested, gazing at him keenly.

Hinton flushed, indignantly.

"How foolish of you!" he returned in ill-humor. "Do you doubt my allegiance to you? If so, say so, and I will withdraw!"

"I didn't say or mean anything of the kind, as you well know!" Mrs. Hinton spoke up, quickly. "It was merely a suggestion to see what you would say."

"Well, be careful not to make any suggestions of the kind, for I do not like them. After working as zealously in your interests as I have done I should be the last one to be suspected."

"Of course! Of course. I'd be foolish not to trust you implicitly. Have your suspicions never turned toward Phineas Fink?"

"Pshaw! no. He'd never attempt anything of this kind, for he knows too well that his nest is well feathered, as the attorney for the estate. And, besides, this writing is utterly unlike his, as you must be aware."

"Well, I am sure, I don't know what to think about it. The whole matter seems enveloped in impenetrable mystery, and, as you say, active and immediate measures must be taken to avoid an explosion. What are you going to do with the writing materials?"

"I'll show you, when I am through," Horace replied, as he seated himself at the writing-table, and began to carefully write a letter, referring to the copy in front of him, every word he wrote.

When he was done he gave what he had written to the widow.

It read as follows:

"NEAR BIG BRACE: TO-DAY.

"MISS JANET EARL:—

"I have just learned of your arrival in town, but circumstances will not permit that I should come there, to see you—circumstances that I will explain, as soon as we meet."

"I am located at a deserted cabin three miles up the gulch, where you will find me, if you come at once, and alone, which it is imperative you should do, as Mrs. Hinton has illegal possession of the estate, and we may have hard work to dispossess her. Do not fail to answer this at once, in person. You cannot miss the appointed place of meeting, as it is directly alongside the upper trail."

"Yours respectfully,
JOHN JONES."

"You mean to have this letter reach Janet, and decoy her to this cabin?" Mrs. Hinton asked.

"Yes, just that."

"What then?"

"I'll shut her up there until she promises to return East, and never come meddling around here any more."

"I don't believe you can extort such a promise from her. She's got pluck and temper, more than you would suppose."

"Bah! I don't give a fig for that. I'll break her in or break her neck."

"But is there no danger of her being found there, and rescued? That would make matters all the worse."

"Pshaw, no! There's a little cellar under the cabin. Once she is shut up there, there is no

danger of her being heard, even if she yells her throat sore."

"But Harry or this Bozeman Bill might make a search for her," the woman persisted, urged on by her fears.

"Let them search! The trap entrance to the cellar is so well concealed that they would never suspect its existence; besides that, I'll arrange to have them in hot water before I tackle the girl!"

Horace Hinton took his departure, feeling sure that he would soon have matters fixed to suit his liking.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD AVALANCHE'S FIND.

AFTER his interview with Horace Hinton, Bozeman Bill lounged around the hotel for some time, hoping to see either Old Avalanche or Harry; but several hours glided by, and neither put in an appearance, and growing impatient, he finally once more set forth upon the street.

In fact, he had not got a glimpse of the Old Annihilator or his goat since the previous evening, and he had about concluded that the veteran had become disgusted with the camp, and taken his departure.

But had he known Avalanche better, he would have made no such inference. The livelier the town, the more was the Great Annihilator in his element, and sure to stay.

Strolling about the gulch until he wearied of it, he threw himself upon the grass, in the shade of a tree, and gave himself up to cogitation, and was thus preoccupied when he heard footsteps, and looking up, beheld a ragged urchin standing before him.

"Well, youngster, what do you want?" he asked, as he noted that the boy's manner was hesitating.

"I—I—be you the feller what this is fer?" and coming near, the boy handed the detective a sealed envelope.

Glancing at the superscription, Bill saw it was as follows:

"TO DEADWOOD DICK, JR."

Greatly surprised, he tossed a coin to the lad, and then proceeded to tear away the wrapper, and peruse the contents of the missive within. The following was what he read:

"DEADWOOD DICK JUNIOR:—

"SIR:—It having come to my notice that you were sent hither for the purpose of hunting me down and capturing me, I take the first opportunity of informing you that I don't propose to be captured at all—most especially not by one of your craft."

"And while conveying to you this intelligence, I wish to furthermore apprise you that you have rashly ventured on an undertaking that promises to bring you into dire trouble, unless you heed the following

"WARNING!"

"Whereas it has come to my notice that you are a detective, appointed by the law to come to these parts and meddle with my professional calling. I, Dark Demming, King of the West, do hereby warn you, fairly, once and for one time only, that, unless you leave Big Brace and this neighborhood at once, you will be killed. So beware!"

"DARK DEMMING, KING OF THE WEST."

"Well, if that isn't cool!" he mused, as he went over the missive a second time. "It appears from this that Mr. Dark Demming is better acquainted with me than I am with him, though I'll be blamed if I know him except by reputation, and from getting a brief glimpse of him when I rescued Old Avalanche and Janet. Wonder where he got his information from as to my identity? Can it be—?"

He paused, and scratched his head a moment, meditatively.

"By George! I wonder if it can be possible that he got it from Horace Hinton? Such a thing might easily be, for I am satisfied that the superintendent is my enemy, and a bitter one, too. Then, again, this same Hinton and Dark Demming may be one and the same person, though if Hinton is superintendent of the mine, it hardly looks probable that he would have much time to go skylarking around as a road-agent. Hang it, the more a fellow tries to figure in this case the deeper grows the mystery. I wonder where the boy is?"

But bub had skurried away out of sight and hearing.

Bozeman Bill at once set out in search of him, for he presumed that another coin would induce the lad to become confidential, and describe the party who gave him the money; but an hour's search failed to discover the boy's whereabouts, and growing disgusted, Bill was about to return to the hotel, when he espied Old Avalanche and the goat, Jeremiah, coming down the trail.

On came the weather-beaten veteran of many a battle, looking grim and uncommunicative

enough, while beside him trotted the vicious-looking goat, whose knotty forehead had struck terror to the heart of Jake Jug the previous evening, and caused him to take leg leave, in a hurry.

Avalanche appeared absorbed in thought, as he came striding along, and did not notice the detective, until he came within a few paces of him; when he halted, with a sort of grunt.

"Hello!" he saluted. "I reckon I've seen you afore. You're the chap as interceded in behalf o' Janet, last night, ain't ye?"

"I am, sir."

"Thort so. Mighty glad ye did, too, fer thet ar' Janet aire a mighty nice gal, an' don't ye fergit it. Let me see: What d'ye call yerself?"

"Oh! sometimes I sail under one name, an' then, again, sometimes under another. At present I am Bozeman Bill. You have had the honor of making my acquaintance once before, however, when I bore the name of Deadwood Dick, Junior!"

Old Avalanche started at his informant, incredulously.

"Great ham-bone thet made soup fer old Joner! ye don't mean it, b'ye!—ye don't mean ter insinuate thet ye'r the same pilgrim wot rescued us from ther road-agent, Dark Demming?"

"I am that very chap!" Bill replied. "Although my personal appearance is somewhat changed. I am the identical namesake of your old friend and pard!"

"Moses an' ther bullrushes! Put 'er thar! Mighty glad ter see ye ag'in—great ham-bone, yes. Tuk er sort o' likin' ter ye from the first I know'd ye war named arter my old pard, Deadwood Dick—the best feller as ever straddled a hoss, or sported a gun, yer kin bet!"

The two shook hands, heartily, and their friendship was then and there cemented firmer together.

"What's ther news?" Avalanche went on. "I hev bin out o' camp, up in ther mountings, ter see ef me an' Jeremiaher couldn't skeer up some b'ar, but I'll be kicked ter death wi' mules ef I c'u'd skeer one."

"There is quite a little news that may interest you, friend Avalanche," Bozeman Bill answered, "and since you appear to be a square old hoss, I'll let you into part of it. To begin with, what do you think of that, eh?" and he handed the Great Annihilator the note of warning he had received from Dark Demming.

"What do I think of that?" replied the veteran, after perusal. "Waal, 'pears like ther galoot takes you for a tenderfoot, and wants to scare you out o' yer boots, or at least, out o' ther vicinity. Now, d'ye kno' what t'other Dick w'u'd 'a' done ef he got sich a billy-doo as thet—an' he's had many o' 'em in his time?"

"Well, no, I can't say as I do."

"I'll tell ye, then. He'd jest laff ther socks clean off his feet, so he would! Tell ye fer a fac' what I see'd him do once, an' I ain't fabricatin', nuther. Dick he war out ridin' one day, when thar kim up ther orfullest wind storm ye ever hearn tell on. Why et's an actooal fact, an' I'll sw'ar to et by ther great ham-bone that tantalized ther larnyx of old Joner, thet ther wind et blew a thousan' miles an hour."

"But, I tell ye, Dick didn't keer fer that. He never felt ter home, nohow, 'cept some sort o' a breeze were stirrin'; so he rid complacently on."

"Well, things went all right, until along on ther highfalutin' spread-eagle wings of old bore-as, came a billydoo, somethin' like the one you've got, thar, an' it struck Dick on ther back o' ther neck with such force that et nearly smashed in his thorax. When Dick tried to pull off the plagney thing, et stuck thar like et was put on wi' mucilage, an' Dick war wonderin' how he war goin' to get it off, when 'long kim a flash o' lightnin', melted the wax on ther envelop, an' Dick hed no deeficulty in gittin' persession of it."

"Waal, to make a long story short, et war a letter from some enemy o' Dick's, an' told him ef he didn't clear out o' ther country, he'd suddintly find himself dead, with his boots on. Then, what d'ye suppose thet 'ar same Dicky o' Deadwood did?"

"Well, I am sure I haven't the least idea!" replied Bozeman Bill, with a smile.

"Waal, I'll tell ye," pursued the Annihilator, apparently in deep earnest. "He jest turned right round in his saddle, facin' the wind, an' he says to et, sez he: 'Hyer, ye howlin' winds o' ther north, I return to ye this bunch of bombast, and bid ye waft et back to the sender, an' tell him I defy him, a thousand times.'"

"An' would ye believe et, sir, thet 'ar wind just whipped immegetly around from nor' ter

south, snatched ther billydoo from Dicky's hands, and tuk et back to the sender! An', most wonderful to relate, when et reached him, et struck him in ther face, knocked his teeth down his thrut, broke his nose, gouged out an eye, and caused him to die of lock-jaw. Now, then, that's ther kind o' a hair-pin Dick war. What's yer think?"

"Well, to tell the truth, and shame the devil, I think that's the biggest lie I ever heard yet," Dick replied without hesitation.

His candor caused Old Avalanche to roar with laughter, until his very sides fairly shook, while Jeremiah capered about as if he was likewise well-pleased.

"Well, mebbe I did stretch et a leetle," the Annihilator admitted. "But then, ye know, yarn half spun, ain't no good fer socks, nohow. Et won't wear. By ther way, I jest thort o' suthin'. Aire ther gal all safe an' snug, up at the hotel?"

"Oh! yes, I guess so," Dick replied, and then went on and explained what had occurred since the previous night, and which of course is not necessary to relate, here.

Old Avalanche listened in grim silence, his battle-scarred visage undergoing no change of expression.

"I told ther gal thet ther chances war big thet she war runnin' a mighty risk, in comin' heer," he said, when Bozeman Bill had done. "So, thar ain't no John Jones to be found here, eh?"

"No. Nobody appears to have any knowledge of such a person, so far as I have questioned."

"D'ye think the girl has any real claim on the estate, or that the present will is a forgery?"

"I do. From Janet's statement, and judging by the letter, I believe that Hamilton Hinton made another will, and left Janet something, and Harry the residue. Whether this will has been destroyed or not is hard to say, but I am satisfied in my own mind that the present existing will is a forgery, from the very fact that it disinherits Harry, who was his father's pet."

"Great ham-bone! Et strikes me you're right. An' now, when ye come to talk about these things, there's something that troubles me."

"What's that?"

"Waal, et is this. When I war comin' down ther gulch, a couple o' mile above heer, I found a glove what luks just like one ther gal wore when I fetched her ter Big Brace."

"Let's see it!"

Old Avalanche produced the glove in question.

It was of a drab-color—a seven-buttoned affair, made to fit a small hand and was a trifle worn, no doubt caused by handling bridle reins.

"It's Janet's glove, sure enough," Bill declared. "She wore gloves of this sort when I saw her in the gulch this morning. I remember them well."

"Where did she go arter you left her?"

"Back to the hotel. I watched."

"Then how ther blazes did her glove come so fur from camp?"

"That I don't know, unless she concluded to take a stroll up the gulch, which I shouldn't think she would have done, as she knows that the Hintons, with the exception of Harry, bear her no good will."

"Then if I war you I'd go an' see if she's at the hotel. There's no tellin' but what some job has been put up to git her out o' camp!"

Bozeman Bill looked anxious.

"You're right!" he assented. "Come! We will go and investigate this matter at once. If ill has befallen her I'll make some one suffer for it, you bet!"

They quickly made their way toward the hotel, the one as interested as the other in pretty Miss Earl's welfare.

On reaching the hotel they made their way to the office counter, where Colonel Corker presided, as urbane and smiling as was his wont.

"Is Miss Earl in her room?" Bill demanded.

"She is not!" was the reply.

"Do you kno' where she is?"

"I do not. A boy came with a message for her and she soon left the hotel."

"What sort of a boy left the message?"

"A ragged kid with red hair."

"The same, no doubt, who brought the message to me," Bill remarked, turning to Avalanche. Then, to Corker:

"Did Miss Earl leave any message for me?"

"By the way, I believe she did!" and taking a letter from his pocket the colonel handed it to the detective, who immediately opened it.

The contents consisted of but a few words, viz.:

"MR. BOZEMAN:—"

"I have just received a note from Mr. Jones, and have gone to see him."

JANET."

That was all.

She did not say where she was going to meet this mysterious individual, Jones, nor when she expected to return.

Bill gave the note to Old Avalanche, who read it over with darkening brow.

"Great ham-bone that discomberated ther larnyx of old Joner!" he growled. "Jest as I feared, from ther moment I found ther glove. Ther gal's been decoyed inter a trap."

CHAPTER • X.

THREE PUZZLED MEN.

BOZEMAN BILL and Avalanche at once withdrew to one side, to talk over the matter, and while thus engaged, Harry Hinton put in an appearance.

Bill then apprised the deceased mine-owner's son of much that he had hitherto been ignorant of, especially regarding Janet's claim to the estate, and what had transpired up to that time.

As may be surmised, Harry was greatly surprised, but at once showed the generosity of his nature, by saying:

"Of course you must know that I am greatly astonished by this revelation, but not so much so as I might be, did I not suspect gross villainy on the part of my uncle and step-mother. I have heard my father speak of a young lady's saving him from having his pockets picked, but he never mentioned her name, nor that he intended to leave her anything when he died. However, that shall make no difference. If it turns out that father left another will, and that Miss Earl is a legatee, she shall freely have every cent the will entitles her to."

"Nobly spoken, Harry, old boy!" Bill declared, seizing his hand and shaking it warmly. "You're just the sort of a fellow I sized you up for, and you can bet your boodle I'm your friend from the word go."

"Yere too, by ther great ham bone thet stuck in ther crop of old Joner!" cried the Annihilator, heartily. "You're a squar' feller, you aire—sixty per cent above whisky proof, an' I'll bet on it. Ye can jest count on me, Old Avalanche the Annihilator, every day in the week, an' twice on Sunday, an' along wi' me aire my goat, hyer, Jeremiaher, who air a reg'lar sojer from Sundown. Then, thar's my mule, Prudence Cordeliar, what can kick ther spots off'm ther moon easy as chawin' cheese. I tell yer, we make a reg'lar regiment when we git a-goin', even ef I am gittin' old an' kinder stiff in ther jints."

"Well, I am sure I am glad to have acquired the friendship of the both of you," Harry responded, "and shall endeavor to merit it in the fullest sense of the word. United as pards, we certainly ought to be able to sift this matter of the will to the bottom, and get at the truth of it."

"And we certainly will!" Dick decided, resolutely. "If there's any bottom to be reached we will reach it, and don't you forget it! What do you think about this John Jones business, Harry?"

"There's no such a person in this camp as John Jones, unless he bears another name than that, and I'll bet on it," Harry replied. "That's one thing I can't understand. Some one undoubtedly sent for Miss Earl, since you have the letter, but the question is *who*? Blame me if I can understand it."

"Nor I. But, since Horace and the widow have found out about her claim and the letter, they naturally bear her no good will, and doesn't it strike you that this summons for her to meet Jones, is a plot to kidnap her and put her out of the way?"

"It does indeed, and I'll give you a straight tip that my uncle and step-mother are not a bit too good to get up and execute such a scheme. Knowing that there are now two claimants, who intend to fight for possession of my father's estate, they will of course fight back, whether they are guilty or not. If guilty of trying to defraud me of my rights, they will struggle all the fiercer, and let no scruples interfere with such plans as they may believe will achieve them victory."

"You are right. I have seen your uncle, and my impression of him is not particularly favorable. As for your step-mother, step-mothers generally are the butt of a great deal of adverse criticism, and very often, I dare say, they deserve it. However this may be there is not a doubt in my mind that Miss Janet has been decoyed into a trap. Do you know a twelve-year-

old lad, in the camp, who dresses very ragged, goes very dirty, and has a shock of red brick hair?"

"Yes, I know him."

"Well, he's the chap who brought me the note from Dark Demming, and the one who brought the note for Miss Earl, which purported to come from John Jones."

"Indeed!"

"Just so! Now, who is this lad, and where can he be found?"

"I can answer the first question, better than the last. He is called Reddy, and is the adoptson of Jake Jug, the bullwhacker. Where Jug got him, I don't know, but he's the worst scamp, of his age, in Christendom. He'll lie, and steal and swear like a pirate, and is always on the lookout for some mean trick to perpetrate. I wouldn't trust the young whelp with a straw, you can bet, for fear he'd use it to play some trick on me with."

"Such a pest is he to the camp, that he has to skurry about on the sly, and lay shady, for if the miners should get hold of him, I do believe they'd skin him alive. No one knows where he sleeps, and he only shows himself when he thinks there is no one around to nab him."

"Humph! Perhaps it is this man, Jug, then, who is playing up Dark Demming?"

"Pooh! no! He never gets far enough away from the whisky shops of the camp to play up road-agent."

"Well we must look up Janet, first, anyhow. In case Horace Hinton has decoyed her into a trap, where would he be most apt to conceal her?"

Harry did not answer, for a few minutes, but seemed to be deliberating on the situation.

"I don't know," he said, finally. "There are a number of deserted cabins, around this part of the country," he said, "where a person could be held in captivity, and likewise a number of mountain caves, so that it would be a hard matter to distinguish which particular one Horace's fancy might select. Where did you say the glove was found?"

"About two miles up the gulch. Eh, Avalanche?"

"Yes, jest about two mile, nigh as I kin judge," the Annihilator replied.

"Well, then, there's a cabin, about a mile further on. It is tenantless from the fact that it is reputed to be haunted. Nobody will live in it, or has lived it, since I came to these parts."

"The very place Horace Hinton would be most apt to place his captive!" Bozeman Bill declared, quickly.

"Perhaps you are right."

"At any rate, we must go and investigate the place!" Bill declared. "Janet shall not be a prisoner long, if I can help it, you bet! Are you ready?"

Both Harry and Avalanche signified that they were, and the trio were about making a move, when Colonel Corker approached.

"Friend Bozeman," he said, "here's another note that was just left for you."

"Who left it?" Bill quickly demanded, as he seized the envelope, and opened it.

"The same lad that brought the note for Miss Earl."

"Very well. Much obliged to you."

The colonel then withdrew, and Bill read the message aloud to his companions.

This is what he read:

"MR. BOZEMAN:—

"DEAR SIR:—I have met Mr. Jones, and he says that in order to establish my claim, it will be necessary for us to start at once for Pierce City, where the late Mr. Hinton's last will and testament is on file. So I shall have to go without bidding you good-by. But I will return shortly, and further employ your services, and liberally reward you. As Mr. Harry Hinton is one of the legatees, it will also be to his interest to come to Pierce City, at his earliest convenience. Please advise him, accordingly, and, believe me, I remain, Your friend,

"JANET EARL."

CHAPTER XI.

MR. FINK TALKS TO BILL'S PISTOL.

AS Bozeman Bill finished reading, the three men stood staring from one to the other, inquiringly, it appearing as if each one was trying to read the other's thoughts.

"Well?" finally said Harry Hinton, interrogatively.

"Well?" quoth Bill.

"Unwell!" declared Avalanche, grimly. "By ther great ham-bone that exasperated the larynx of old Joner! that's too thin!"

"Just my opinion!" agreed Bill.

"But it sounds all right and reasonable enough," Harry said. "If she hadn't said for

me to come to Pierce City, I shouldn't think so much of it."

"That's only a bluff, to make the letter appear all the more genuine."

"Then, you don't think Miss Earl sent it?"

"I know she did not!"

"How do you know?"

"Well, in the first place, the chirography does not correspond in the least with Janet's. Secondly, she is too shrewd a young lady to go away with an utter stranger, without first seeking my counsel. Thirdly, if John Jones were an honorable man instead of a rascal, he would have come here to see her, instead of asking her to come out of town to see him; and lastly, the very fact that the boy who delivered me Dark Demming's message, also delivered this, puts the stamp of fraud on the whole business!"

"By ther great ham-bone, yer right!" spoke up the Annihilator, "right, old boy, as ther opposite direction from left!"

"Well, maybe you are right," Harry was forced to acquiesce. "But if Janet didn't write the letter, who did?"

"Your esteemed step-mother, most likely. Look at it—see if you recognize the chirography."

Harry did as directed, and then nodded his head affirmatively.

"Yes, I recognize the hand," he said. "The letter was written by my step-mother. I know her peculiar 'e's' and 'h's.'"

"Just so. Well, I recognized the fraud at once. You see it was a very clever double scheme—first to deaden any suspicion that Janet had been made a captive; second to decoy you to Pierce City, en route for which place you would no doubt have been waylaid and murdered. Thus, your uncle and step-mother would have triumphed. See?"

"I see!" Harry assented. "It is a diabolical plot, from beginning to end. Even now, poor Janet may be dead!"

"I hope not," Bill said, doubtfully. "At any rate we must delay the search no longer. So come, let's be moving!"

"One moment," said Harry. "I want a word with you in private."

He took the detective by the arm and led him to one side.

"Well, what is it?" Bill demanded, considerably surprised.

"This. I want you to remain behind and let me and Avalanche conduct this search alone."

"Alone? Why?"

"For a number of good reasons, among which I may name the following: Firstly, I have no doubt but what we shall find Janet at the haunted cabin, and if so, two of us will be sufficient to effect her rescue. Secondly, there is plenty of work here for you to busy yourself with, and thirdly, I have a particular reason for wishing to be the one of the two of us who is concerned in Janet's rescue."

"And why this third reason?"

"Well—I—I—you see, Bill, old boy, the case is just like this. I've seen this Miss Earl a couple of times, and taken a decided fancy for her, and being heart and hand free I would like to cultivate her acquaintanceship and get into her good graces in a way that would cause her to look upon me with favor. Now, what better coaching could I have than by coming to her rescue in an hour of distress? See the point?"

Bozeman Bill smiled broadly.

"Well, a blind man ought to be able to see that point," he admitted. "But you are taking a one-sided view of the matter, are you not?"

"Why so?"

"Because, how do you know but what I may have a hankering after the fair heiress prospective?"

Harry colored and bit his lip.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I was not aware that you had any weakness in that direction."

"Ha! ha! Neither I have," laughed Bill.

"So go ahead and sail in, old boy, and win the beauty if you can. If you do, though, I am to have the first dance with the bride. Now, that's fair enough, ain't it, eh?"

"It's a bargain!" Harry declared, apparently very much relieved. "I'll away to the rescue now, and you need expect neither Avalanche nor myself back until we find Janet."

"Hold a bit! You spoke of there being work here for me to do. Did you refer to anything in particular, may I ask?"

"Well, yes. I have about come to the conclusion that Phineas Fink may know as much about Janet's being summoned to Big Brace as any one else. He is a cunning scalawag, and may have an eye on the fortune himself. There's no telling."

"Very true. There can be no harm in inter-

viewing him, at any rate, and I'll pay him a visit at once. I may be able to learn something to our advantage, anyhow."

"If he is close mouthed, scare the wits out of him," Harry suggested. "He's an arrant coward, and I'll go you one he'll knuckle under, if you tackle him in proper shape."

"Very well, I'll see what I can do with him. If any one can bring him to terms, I've the conceit to believe I'm that man."

They then rejoined Old Avalanche, and Harry and the Annihilator took their departure, while Bill set forth to make the proposed visit.

Fink's office was in a front room over a grocery store, and was accessible only by an outside covered stairway.

Bill had no difficulty in finding the place, and he ascended the stairs, opened the door and entered the office.

It was a small, uncarpeted room, whose only furniture consisted of a desk, a writing-table and three stools.

Fink himself was seated on one of these stools, smoking a short-stemmed clay pipe, when Bozeman Bill entered.

He was a tall, awkward-looking individual, thin as a rail, and with a pinched, sallow visage.

He was beardless as a boy, his hair was of a tow color, and though his features expressed no intelligence, his small gray eyes were bright and keen.

He wore what had been a broadcloth suit in its earlier days, but now looked anything but that, so faded and greasy was it.

He gave Bozeman Bill a quick stare as he entered, which seemed to say:

"Well, who are you, and how much money is there in you?"

Instead, however, he said:

"Good-day, sir! Walk right in and have a seat. Is there anything I can do for you in my line of business this morning?"

"I don't know but what there is," Bill replied, as he seated himself upon a stool near the door.

"You see, Mr. Jones, I called to learn a little about this Janet Earl case. The young lady is here in Big Brace, and anxious to learn why you sent for her, since, on her arrival here, she finds Hamilton Hinton's widow in possession. Some explanation is surely due the young lady, and I have been detailed to seek it."

Bill spoke as if he meant just what he said, and while he was speaking, he watched the lawyer with a steady gaze.

At mention of the name of Jones, he saw Phineas Fink start a trifle, but only a trifle, and he at once answered.

"I see that you have made a mistake in the person. There is no such a person here as Mr. Jones. My name is Fink, sir—Phineas Fink, attorney at law."

"Your name may be Fink, all right," Bill replied, quietly, "but I am aware that you sometimes sign yourself John Jones!"

"I insist that you are wrong!" was the sharp retort, while the superannuated disciple of Blackstone flushed red with anger. "I never signed myself John Jones in all my life!"

Bill laughed coolly.

"Oh! I expected you would deny it!" he said, sarcastically. "But it will do you no good. You will find that in dealing with me, the easiest way is the best, by far. Do you know who I am?"

"I do not!"

"Then I will enlighten you. I am called Bozeman Bill, the rascal-roger! I am an officer of the law, and a detective!"

Fink betrayed no surprise or uneasiness, at this announcement; on the contrary, his countenance was perfectly passive.

"Well, what has that got to do with me?" he demanded, refilling and lighting his pipe.

"You'll find it has a great deal to do with you, if you don't act sensibly, sir. I am not a man to be trifled with, by any one, and most especially by you. The matter of it is, Fink, you've got yourself into a box, and the only way for you to save your skin is by acting like a man, and making a clean breast of it!"

"You are certainly speaking in riddles to me, sir!" Fink persisted. "First, you dub me Jones; and now you would have me make a clean breast of it. What do you want me to do—to say that I am a thief, a road-agent or a murderer?"

"No—simply that you are a forger and a low-lived rascal!" Bill retorted, bluntly. "After you admit that much, you can do as you see fit about the other crimes!"

"Well, sir, I shall admit nothing of the sort, and I defy you to prove anything of the sort against me. Moreover, if you have come here with a view of insulting me, or to pick a quar-

rel, I'll be pleased to have you take your departure."

"I shall go when I get ready," Bill assured the lawyer. "I am here on business, and when I tackle a job of this sort I generally stick to it till it's done. As for insulting you, that's an impossibility. You're too old a sinner to be insulted. Fink, there's no use of your attempting to hold out against me, and pretend innocence, for it won't work. The fact of the matter is, as I intimated before, the cat's out of the bag; everything is known, and the only way you can save yourself is by turning in your evidence against the others. By doing this I may be able to get you out of the scrape. Otherwise, you'll go up with the rest!"

"I am still ignorant of what you are talking about. What is this that is known, that you refer to?"

"Do you want to know?"

"I certainly do."

"Then, I will tell you; you were Hamilton Hinton's attorney?"

"Yes."

"You drew up his last will?"

"I did."

"You are cognizant of how he came to his death—and who were his murderers?"

"Certainly not. All I ever have known is that he died of heart disease!"

"That's a lie, to begin with. After, or maybe a little before Hinton's death, you got up another will, and forged your client's signature to it!"

"That is false—false as hell itself!"

"This will," pursued Bozeman Bill, with the most provoking coolness, "you turned over to the widow, thereby placing her in possession of the estate, you receiving therefor, a handsome stipend!"

"False again! Do I look like a man who had received a stipend of any sort, very lately?" and Fink gave a rueful glance at his seedy attire. Bozeman Bill was forced to smile, but went on.

"Oh! you're shrewd enough to play your part well, I have not impeached your smartness, in the least. But, to continue:

"You retained or destroyed the original will; at least, claimed to the widow and Horace that you had done away with it. You did not, however; too shrewd a rascal were you, by far, to do that. You saw in the perspective a fine little chance to line your pockets with Hamilton Hinton's shekels!"

A faint shade of pallor flitted across the lawyer's countenance, and he changed positions upon his stool.

It was evident that he was growing uneasy.

"Oh! you can make all the foolish conjectures you please," he responded. "They are all lies, and I dare you to prove the truth of one of them."

"I can do it without the least trouble, and in a way that will be surprising to you. As I said before, sir, you were too shrewd a rascal to destroy the original will, for you calculated to make money out of it. Your plan was this:

"You proposed to bleed the widow, from time to time, of hush money, and if she finally kicked you would threaten to produce the original will, and if she would give you a big price for it you would sell it to her. If not, you would produce Janet Earl, who is a legatee, and out of revenge, give her her rights and oust the widow!"

"So you see, Mr. John Jones, I've got you down to the very dot, and there's no use of your kicking. Your only escape-way is to make a full and complete confession, that will give Hamilton Hinton's rightful heirs what belongs to them; otherwise, I shall arrest you for conspiracy, and when the people of Big Brace come to know the true state of affairs, it is doubtful, if they will let you escape from the town alive, as I understand that none of them look upon you with favor!"

This parting shot appeared to affect Fink more than the rest, for he coughed, and twisted uneasily upon his seat.

"Well, are you through?" he demanded, heaving a sigh, as if he were weary of listening to Bill's harangue.

"If you have anything to say, say it!" Bill demanded curtly. "It will be simply useless for you to make any denial, however, as I will pay no attention to it."

"I can say nothing more than that you have mistaken your man!" Fink declared, positively. "That I am no way connected with any of the charges you mention, I will swear to, on a stack of Bibles as high as this house!"

"Add on a couple of stacks more and I won't believe you."

"I did not say I did not know anything about a case somewhat similar to the one you have outlined!" replied Fink. "It is barely possible that I may be able to be of some assistance to you in this matter!"

"Bah! Your very words give you away. You've got that original last will, and I want it!"

"I have not got it!"

"You lie! You have got it. I want it, and what's more, I'm going to have it!"

"Well, I repeat I have not got it, and so I don't know how you're going to get it!"

"In this way!" Bill cried, now thoroughly aroused, for he was convinced that the shyster was the very person who had lured Janet to Big Brace, and that his own outline of the plot was correct.

He drew a revolver from his belt, and pulled the hammer back to full cock.

"Now, then, Phineas Fink!" he said, sternly, "I want that will. I'll give you just five minutes to produce it. If it is not in my hands by the expiration of that time, I'll put a bullet through you, sure's my handle is Bozeman Bill!"

There was no mistaking that the detective meant just what he said.

Fink grew pale.

"Bozeman Bill!" he said, "I am powerless to prevent you from killing me, for, as I told you before, I have not the will. Had I it in my possession, you may be sure I'd give it up before I'd lose my life. You can kill me, and then search me and the premises, but you will not find the will, because it is not here."

"Then, you acknowledge that such a will is in existence?"

"Yes. I'll even do more: I'll own up that the most of your accusation—all of it, in fact, except that I knew how Hamilton Hinton came to his death—was correct. I did draw up the bogus will, and gave it to the widow, for the very reasons you named, and I secreted the original document miles from here. So far, the scheme has profited me nothing, because I wanted the girl here before I began operations."

"Now, since you have been keen enough to ferret out this matter, I'll tell you what I'll do: As soon as it comes dark, I will go and get the will, and have it here at my office, by midnight, when I will place it in your hands. I will also lay a trap so that you can entrap the widow and Horace Hinton, confront them with their guilt, and arrest them if you choose—but I am to go scot free; and if my services are worth anything to the heirs, they may reward me as they see fit, for I am very poor. If not, I will not grumble!"

Bozeman Bill eyed the lawyer a moment, keenly, and in silence.

Could he trust him? Or was this but a subterfuge to ward off the threatened penalty of death.

Bill was a good judge of human nature, and now concluded that Fink was in earnest.

"I don't know whether to trust you, or not!" he finally said.

"You can do so, implicitly!" was the reply. "If I never do another thing in my life, I will do as I have told you. Of course, now, the will is no good to me, and I want the rightful heirs to profit by it."

"How do you propose to entrap the widow, and Horace Hinton?"

"In this way," and Fink arose, and went to his desk, where he spent a couple of moments, when he returned, and handed a slip of paper to Bill.

It read as follows:

"HORACE AND WIDOW HINTON:—

"You are well aware that the will I gave you, which makes you the present possessors of the Hinton estate, is a forgery, but, until now, you are not aware that the original will is in existence, and that I hold it in my possession. I have held it back until it should become of a marketable value, which it has now attained."

"Circumstances make it imperative that I leave Big Brace at once, and I can hold the will no longer. I need money to get away with, and must have it."

"Knowing that you now would be willing to pay more for it than the real heirs, Harry Hinton and Janet Earl, I make you this offer: Meet me to-night, at midnight, at the haunted cabin, and give me ten thousand dollars in greenbacks, and I'll give you the will. If you fail to come, I shall take it for granted that you do not wish to negotiate, and shall turn the document over to Harry Hinton for what I can get, and skip out. Trusting I shall see you,

"I subscribe myself,

"Yours in dead earnest,

"PHINEAS FINK!"

"When it comes dark," said the lawyer, when Bill had finished the perusal, "you are to see that the note reaches the widow. I will carry out my part, like a man!"

"Fink, I will trust you!" the detective said, rising. "I don't often do things of the sort, but will make an exception, this time. Do as you have promised, and you shall be rewarded. Fail me and I'll hunt you down to death. Remember!"

Then turning, Bill left the office, in the full belief that he had scored a victory, and that the end of this, his most interesting detective experience, was not far distant.

Nor was it!

The rope was slowly but surely uncoiling!

CHAPTER XII.

HINTON'S ANTE AND SNEAKY'S TREACHERY.

As the reader has probably surmised, Horace Hinton had successfully accomplished his plan of luring Janet Earl to the haunted cabin, and imprisoning her in the cellar.

Knowing this much, it will hardly be necessary for us to tax the reader's patience with the details of the matter, so we will relate what transpired afterward.

When satisfied that there was little or no danger of his captive escaping, Horace returned at once to Big Brace, and had the note prepared which was delivered to Bozeman Bill at the hotel.

Feeling sure this bit of strategy would have the desired effect of starting Harry off for Pierce City, he began to hunt around for the ruffian, Jake Jug, and his pal, Sneaky Smith.

After an hour's search he found the latter, lying in under the shade of a clump of bushes, seeking solace from a long-necked black bottle.

He had evidently only recently commenced an attack on the "pizen," for he was but little under the influence of liquor.

As soon as Hinton saw the condition of things he snatched the bottle away from the bumper and hurled it against a rock, where it was shattered into a thousand atoms.

Sneaky gave vent to an angry growl at this.

"Say, what d'yer mean?" he demanded.

"Wot's bitin' yer?"

"Bug-juice ain't goin' to bite you, for a while yet," the superintendent declared. "There's work for you and Jake to do."

Sneaky gave a grim laugh.

"Little work ye'll git out o' Jake fer a while," he declared.

"Why not?"

"Go down ter his roost an' see."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's got 'em!" Sneaky announced, sententiously. "Got 'em bad, too!"

"Got what, you fool?"

"The jims—the jams, yer know—snakes in his boots. He stole a gallon o' whisky out o' old Corker's cellar last night, an' the big hog wouldn't give me a smell of his breath even, but just swilled the hull gallon down. An' now he's got 'em—got 'em ther worst kind, too. I've seen men hev ther ordinary one-headed rams, but Jake's got double-headers, horns an' all. I went down ter try an' pacify him, but he was goin' ter carve me up inter sandwich meat, so I jest er-bout sashayed out o' ther vicinity. He's got two six-inch bowies ready fer use, an' ef ye want'er git did up proper, boss, jest mazourky right down thar, an' he'll accommodate you."

Hinton uttered an oath.

"Curses on the fool!" he gritted. "He's always drunk or can't be found when I want him."

"Waal, he ain't fit fer nothin' now," Sneaky declared. "Ef ther boa-constrictors don't do him up 'fore another day I'll eat dirt. What is et yer want done, boss?"

"What's that to you?" Hinton growled, glaring at him savagely.

"Oh! nothin', boss, only I tho't mebbe I might fill Jake's place, ef 'twas anything important. Ye kno' ye allus hev give yer jobs to Jake an' paid him fer 'em, an' I never got much, tho' et was me as had to do the dirty work, four times out o' five. Still, I've allers kept cluss-mouthed, an' et kinder seems to me that faithful service orter hev ets reward, an' I orter stand a show oncet in a while."

Hinton eyed the man a moment in savage silence.

"You ain't got spunk enough to kill a cat!" he finally snarled.

"Try me an' see, boss! 'Cause I knuckle under to Jake, 'tain't sayin' I'm afeard to tackle a job. What I want's money enuff ter pull East!"

Hinton's venomous eyes sparkled at this.

"Well, I want a man killed!" he said.

"When?"

The arch-schemer glanced at the declining sun.

"To-night!" he replied, "after dark. The sooner, then, the better!"

"Kerect. Give me the job and I'm your man. What's the critter?"

"Bozeman Bill!"

"Humph!"

"Oh! You weaken, eh?"

"Nary. I'll watch my chance and tap him in the back of the neck. I never fail there. Wouldn't like ter face him, though. He's too gentle with his dukes ter suit my complexion. What's the tariff?"

Hinton considered a moment.

"Will you swear to do the job up right and make no balks?" he demanded, eying Sneaky keenly.

"Dead sure certain. As I told ye before, I've did nearly all of Jake's dirty work, an' never missed a job, an' I never got much pay, nuther. 'Tain't likely I'd slip up on a job fer you!"

"Very well; I'll try you. I'll give you five hundred dollars to fix Bozeman Bill so that he never sees the light of another day. But, mind you, I never want to see your face in Big Brace again, after this meeting!"

"Eh?"

"You heard what I said!"

"But, how'm I ter get me money, then?"

"You get it, *now*, if you swear to skin out, and never return, after the act is done!"

"Correct! I swear it. It will suit me ter a capertal dot. The sooner I can puckachee, the better."

"Very well!"

Hinton took out a well-filled wallet, counted out the stipulated sum, and placed it in the ruffian's hands.

"Now then," he continued, "you understand what you're to do, and that you're to let whisky alone!"

"You bet! Nary a drop more, till I'm miles from Big Brace."

"All right. Good-by!"

"Good-by!"

The two villains shook hands, and Horace set off toward the Hinton residence.

When he was gone, Sneaky once more sat down in the shade of the bushes, and counted over the money, chuckling as he did so.

"Five hundred dollars!" he soliloquized. "Great guns! That's more'n I ever had in my hands before, at one time, in my life; and all that just fer killin' a feller! Ugh! I don't fancy ther killin' part so well as I do the money. Never killed a man in my life. S'pose I *could* do et, tho'. That was great guff I give the boss, 'bout doin' all o' Jake's jobs, an' 'bout Jake's havin' the rams! Ef Jake know'd I'd stole this job from him, how he'd climb me, tho'! Wonder whar he is, anyhow? Layin' fer Bozeman Bill, I s'pose. He'll kill him, ef I don't, so what's the use o' my botherin' my head about it?"

"Sneaky Smith, old stockin', what's the matter wi' yer takin' a quiet sashay all by yerself? You've got the boodle, an' ef Jakey gits onter ther fact, yer goose is gander. Ther climate w'd be rather too warm around here fer yer indervidoal health. Strikes me ther best thing ye kin do is ter harness up Shank's mare and strike out fer ther risin' sun!"

He examined the money once more, and put it carefully away in his pocket; then he arose, and gazed around him.

Few people were stirring about the camp—no one who appeared to be paying any attention to him.

"Well, here goes," he muttered, striking off up the gulch. "By-by to ye, Jakey, old pard! Long life and prosperity. I've called the deal on you at last!"

He kept straight on, never looking back. Stealthily a man followed him.

It was Jake Jug himself. He had been snoozing in the same clump of bushes, sleeping off a drunk, and had overheard all.

Both soon disappeared from view.

An hour later, Jug returned to camp.

Upon his knife there were fresh blood-stains!

CHAPTER XIII.

WINGING THE TERROR.

It was nearly sunset when Bozeman Bill left the office of Phineas Fink, and after sunset in that locality it takes but a few minutes to get dark, so deep down was the camp located between the mountain walls.

Bill went straightway to the hotel, but found that neither Harry Hinton nor Old Avalanche had returned, which gave him considerable anxiety, for it told him that they had not yet

found Janet. So, instead of going in to supper, the detective lit a cigar and went out on the hotel piazza, to await their coming.

In case Janet could not be found half of his victory would be lost.

He had sanguine hopes, however, that he would see the trio approaching, for, to make the *denouement* complete, he wanted to have them present at the haunted cabin that night.

He had been seated but a few minutes, and was engaged in chatting with a new arrival in the camp, when he espied Jake Jug coming up the street.

The bully was swaggering along with an important sort of stride, and his very motions, and the grim expression of his countenance, told Bozeman Bill that he was in a ripe humor for mischief.

It was the detective's notion that Jug would attempt to assault him, as soon as he reached the piazza, but in this he was mistaken, for the ruffian simply gave him an ugly glance, and brushed past him into the bar-room, where, in a loud blatant voice, he called for whisky.

Bill glanced into the bar-room occasionally, but each time he did so, saw Jug standing at the bar, pouring down whisky, glassful after glassful.

"He either means to get paralyzed drunk, or else he's getting up nerve to tackle me," Bill thought. "If he tackles me, however, he'll not want to tackle another man right away. I'll give him a pointer on that!"

Jug continued to pour down the liquor, until, to use a Western expression, he had got his "tank full," then he came out on the piazza.

So stealthy and cat-like was his tread that he had reached Bill's side and laid a hand upon his shoulder ere the detective was aware of his presence.

"Soy, billo, old fel!" the bully saluted, giving Bill's shoulder a fierce grip. "How's yer think 'bout things in general, anyhow?"

"Take your duke off my shoulder, or I'll mighty quick show you how my think is!" Bill retorted.

"Neow, looker hyer, Mister Bose, yer mustn't git riled at me, 'cause I'm one o' ther best fellers in ther world—in yer eye, yer know. I jest come out hyer ter ax yer ter have a drink at my 'spense. 'Twon't cost ye a cent, yer see. Lik-ker's free as water wi' me. That's 'cause my name is Jug. Haw! haw! haw! See ther p'int o' ther joke? Yas, I've got er job ter 'tend to, an' 'fore I do et, I want yer ter—"

"Much obliged to you, Jacob, but I don't indulge at all," Bill interrupted.

"So ye won't drink wi' me, hey?" and removing his hand from Bill's shoulder, the ruffian came around in front of him, and assuming a half-squatting position, leered in his face. "So ye won't drink with me, hey, you primped-up son of a squaw?"

"No, I'll not drink with you!" Bill cried, with rising temper, "and if you don't go along about your business, I'll give you occasion to levant in a hurry."

"Ye will, hey?" and the bully now drew himself up to his fullest height, with an air of great importance. "Do I look like er galoot as was afeard uv a leetle banty, the likes o' you? Do I look like a feller as was brought up in the woods to be skart out by owls? Nary ther time! Why, I've killed better men than you, before breakfast, I hev. D'ye see that?"

And he drew forth his knife, upon which there were still fresh spots of blood.

"D'ye see that? That's what did the job a while ago, fer a chap what went back on me. An' now, I was tellin' ye I had a job to do, an' ye might as well know what it is, fu'st as last. I've taken a contract to kill *you*!" and without further warning the terror of Big Brace rushed upon the sport, brandishing his knife.

A cry of horror arose from the little crowd assembled upon the piazza, for, as Bozeman Bill had not drawn a weapon, it seemed inevitable that he would be murdered in cold blood; but, as the bully seemed about to drive home his blood-stained blade, the right foot of the detective came up like a flash, and caught Mr. Jug fair in the stomach with a force that made Jug double up like a jack-knife, and uttering a yell of pain, the big brute collapsed, and fell to the ground, the knife dropping at Bill's feet.

Picking it up, and tossing it to the bully, Bill then drew a blade of his own, and arose.

"Get up, you wretch!" he cried, sternly, "and defend yourself, for, since you say you have taken a contract to kill me, we shall have to see who will put in the best blow. Meet me like a man, or, by the eternal, I'll fill yer carcass so full o' holes it will answer for a sieve!"

"Hooray!" cried several of the bystanders.

"Make a ring, an' let 'em fight et out. Ther best man wins, all the time!"

A ring was quickly formed in the street, in front of the hotel, and Bozeman Bill stepped promptly into it, looking cool and confident—handsome and fearless.

As for Jug, he regained his feet with an effort, and glanced around him, as if seeking for an avenue of escape; but the crowd hedged him in on all sides.

"Oh! you've got ter fight et out, Jakie!" some one shouted. "Yer can't crawfish now, so ye might as well prick up yer courage. You came to murder the sport, an' he's got a right to make ye fight."

"That's what's ther matter!" came another shout. "Ye war tryin' ter fix up a funeral, an' now we're goin' ter hev a funeral, hit or miss!"

Jug saw that he was in for it, so he picked up his blood-stained blade, and stepped into the ring, facing the man whose life he would have taken with the assassin's blow.

He was very nervous, and his limbs trembled beneath him.

"Get ready!" Bozeman Bill ordered. "Colonel Corker, will you do us the favor to count three?"

"With all the pleasure imaginable!" the colonel assured, rubbing his hands, as if enjoying the sport. "Get ready, gentlemen, an' ef either of you get killed, and you happen to meet any o' my chums t'other side the river, jest give 'em my respects, an' tell 'em I'll be along by and by! All ready! One! two! THREE!"

At the word three, both men stepped promptly forward; there came the clash! clash! clash of steel.

When Bozeman Bill stepped from the ring, he was congratulated on all sides for having so "winged" the terror of Big Brace that the bully would be a terror no more, and when he entered the bar-room, he found, to his surprise and joy, that Old Avalanche and Harry had just returned, accompanied by Janet, whom they had found and rescued, after a long and tedious search.

Janet was sent at once to her room, and directed to remain there, until she was wanted, as Bozeman Bill was not desirous that Horace Hinton should learn of her escape, just yet.

Bill then informed Harry and Avalanche of the result of his interview with Phineas Fink, and what was likely to yet take place, that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

FINK AS GOOD AS HIS WORD.

NIGHT came on, dark and gloomy. The sky was densely overcast and a heavy rain storm was impending.

Bozeman Bill, Harry and Avalanche remained at the hotel, until late in the evening. At nine o'clock, Bill hired a miner to deliver Fink's message to the widow, ordering him, in case any questions were asked, to say that it came from the lawyer.

Within ten minutes after the message was sent, Horace Hinton entered the saloon.

He first went to the bar and procured a drink; then, after looking over the assemblage, and particularly at the three sitting at a card-table, he abruptly took his departure.

"Did you notice it?" Bill asked with a smile.

"Notice what?"

"Horace came to see if we were here. He suspected by that message that it was we who were trying to put up a job on them. Now he is satisfied to the contrary. I will fix it, now. I'll go and see if Fink has returned and if so, we'll all start for the cabin, at once."

He left the saloon, and was gone about half an hour, when he returned.

"It's all right!" he said. "I saw Fink, and have got the original will. He has gone on ahead to see that the road is clear. We will start at once! Victory is ours, to-night!"

No time was lost, the quartette started forth, Harry Hinton acting as Janet's escort, playing the gallant cleverly, and evidently to the young ladies' great satisfaction.

When the haunted cabin was reached, they found Fink standing in the doorway, awaiting their arrival.

"It's all right!" he said. "They've not put in an appearance yet. Come in. I've something to show you."

They entered the cabin which contained two apartments.

Lighting a candle which he had brought along, Fink conducted them to the rear apartment,

where, lying outstretched upon the floor, was Sneaky Smith, covered with blood, and apparently lifeless.

"Jake Jug did it!" Fink explained. "I found him in the gulch, and brought him here."

"Is he dead?"

"No. He has dropped asleep from the effects of the morphine I gave him to allay his pain. He won't live, though. As soon as our game arrives, I will awaken him."

"What for?"

"Because he knows all about how Hamilton Hinton came to his death, and has volunteered to make his dying confession to you!"

"Ah! this is indeed luck! But, are you sure that Horace and the widow will come?"

"Oh! yes, I've not a doubt of it, and I shouldn't wonder if they'd be along pretty soon, too, in order to get here ahead of me. When they come, you're to remain here until I cough, when you are to march in and order them to surrender. If they refuse, shoot them down without hesitation. You being an officer of the law, the law will warrant you in doing so."

"Very well, I'll attend to that!" Bill assured. "I'm not foolish enough to let my game escape, once it is in my grasp!"

Phineas Fink was not in error about the prompt arrival of Horace and Mrs. Hinton.

They had started early, for fear Fink might get ahead of them and discover Janet's presence in the cellar.

It was but a little after ten when there came a knock on the door, which Fink opened and admitted them to the cabin.

The widow was heavily cloaked and veiled, and Hinton wore a broad-brim hat that was pulled down to his eyes.

"We are here, scoundrel," he said, after Fink had closed the door, "in answer to your message. What do you mean, sir?"

"I believe, if I remember correctly, that I expressed my meaning quite explicitly in the note."

"Which is equivalent to saying that you have been playing us for a couple of fools, and have been holding back the original will all the time?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Have you got that will now?"

"Have you got the ten thousand?"

"No matter whether we have or have not. We want to see that will."

"I want to see that ten thousand, too."

"You'll not get it, so there!"

"Then you'll not get the will!"

"Phineas Fink, if you don't produce that will instantly, you'll never leave this place alive! We have come prepared for you, my fine fellow, and we mean business!"

"And so do we mean business!" cried Bozeman Bill, leaping into the room, followed by Harry and Avalanche, each of the trio clutching cocked revolvers in either hand.

"Dare but to move a hand or foot, either of you, and we'll spill your brains all over this floor!"

The widow uttered a scream of alarm, while Horace Hinton uttered a fearful oath, but neither of them offered to make a move, for they well knew it behooved them not to do so.

"Keep them covered, boys, while I bind them!" Bill ordered. "Don't hesitate to shoot, if they make any resistance."

And producing straps, the detective bound the prisoners' arms behind their backs, and in a like manner, fastened them together.

"Now, there you are, as snug as a ring on the finger!" he said. "If I had an ox yoke, I could couple you up in better shape, to be sure, but I guess you'll answer, as you are!"

"I want to know what's the meaning of this indignity?" Hinton cried.

"Well, my pretty birds," was Bill's answer, "the cat is out of the bag, and your game is up. Mr. Fink, here, has confessed all about the forgery, and surrendered the original will to me, which makes Harry Hinton and Janet Earl joint heirs to the real and personal estate of your murdered brother!"

"My murdered brother?" gasped Horace, turning deadly pale.

"Yes, your murdered brother. He was murdered and you and his wife did the work!"

"You lie, you hell-hound, you lie! Hamilton Hinton died of heart-disease!"

"Oh! that won't work. His remains will be exhumed, to-morrow, and then, we will see if he was not a victim of foul play. But, even that is not necessary, for we have a sure witness. Fink, go fetch him in!"

Fink and Avalanche went into the next room, and soon returned, supporting Sneaky Smith between them.

He was very pale, and evidently sinking rapidly.

"Smith, who knifed you?" Bill asked.

"Jake Jug!"

"What for?"

"I stole a job on him. Horace Hinton hired me to kill you. Jake see'd him pay me, an' when I was goin' to skip the town, he follered me and knifed me."

"Short, are you aware you cannot live?"

"Yes."

"And with death staring you in the face, would you willfully tell a lie?"

"Nary time!"

"Then, do you know anything about Hamilton Hinton's death?"

"Yes. The day before he died his wife sent me down to Pierce City, to have a prescription put up. The druggist told me to be careful of it, cause it was a powerful drug."

"Well, what else?"

"Next day, I was axed to come to the house. I went, and the widder, thar, she give me a bundle, all done up in brown paper, and told me to take it into the woods and burn it, an' she'd give me five dollars. I burnt et, but I examined it first."

"Well, what did the bundle contain?"

"Ther suit o' clothes Mr. Hinton had worn, only a few hours before. They were soppin' wet wi' blood!"

"That will do. Horace and Alecia Hinton, it becomes my duty, as an officer of the law, to lock you up on the charge of murder."

Dear reader, our story is nearly told.

The guilty pair were shut up in the local cooler, but when it came to be known that very night that one or the other of them was the murderer of Big Brace's former leading citizen, a furious mob immediately organized, broke into the jail and took the prisoners out and lynched them to the handiest tree, and no one tried to prevent the awful retribution!

Of course Harry and Janet came into rightful possession of the inheritance and they are soon to be married.

They of course insisted upon rewarding Bozeman Bill handsomely, as well as Old Avalanche, while Fink, who at once left Big Brace for good, bore away with him a goodly sum.

Whether Dark Demming was Horace Hinton or some one of his several villainous agents was not then developed. If Fink knew he did not reveal that secret; but certain it is the solitary road-agent never again reappeared in that locality after Horace Hinton was strung up.

THE END.

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